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THE MAGAZINE OF Fantasy & Science Fiction

JANUARY

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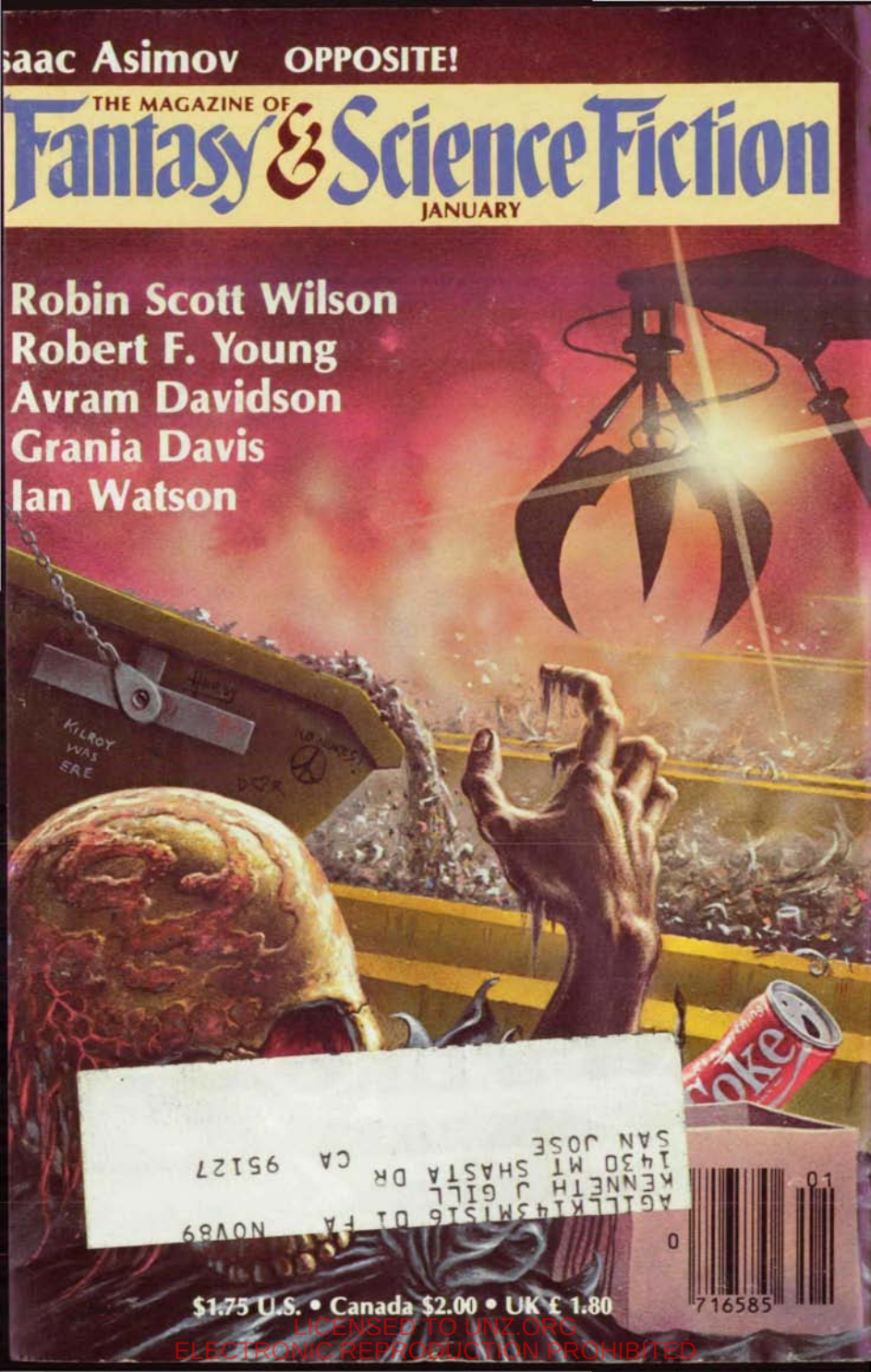

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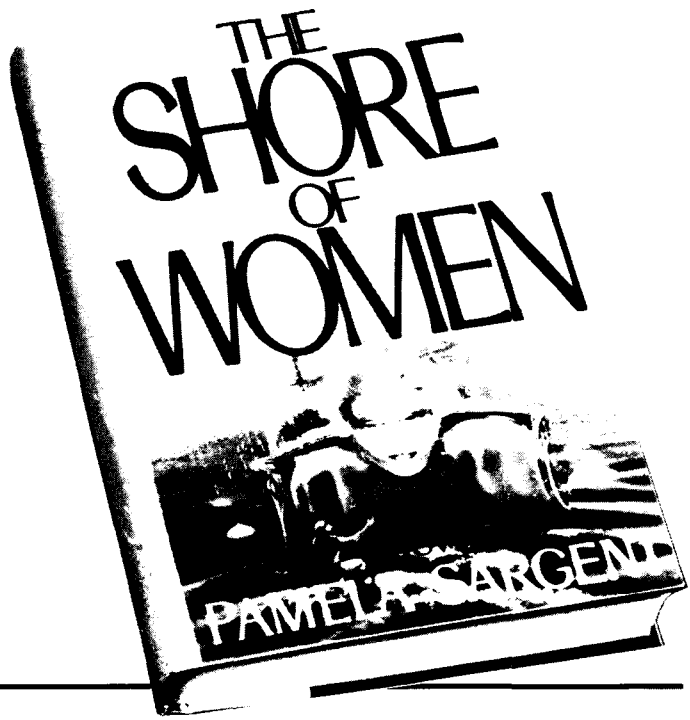

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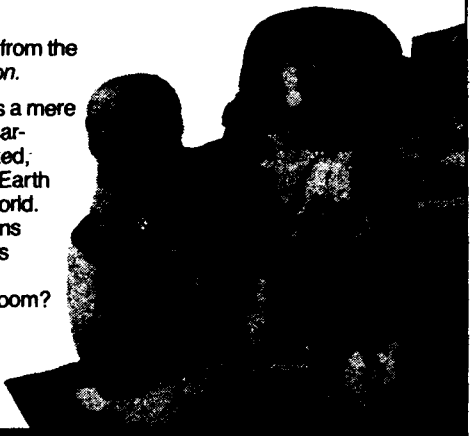

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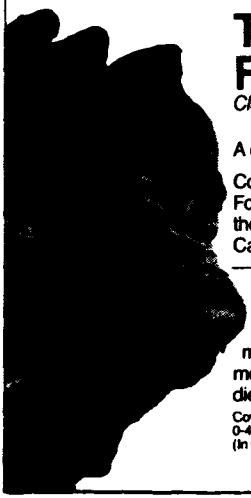

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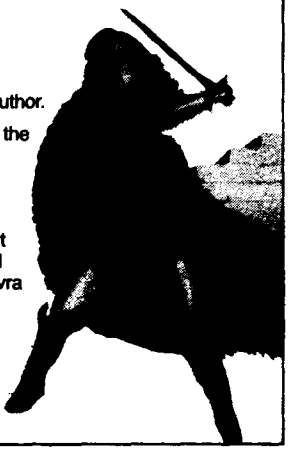

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Robin Scott Wilson is president of California State University, Chico and is also a first rate writer who contributed several distinctive stories to F&SF in the late 1960's and early 70's. It's a pleasure to welcome him back with this appealing story of the remarkable events that occurred at the Crestview Manor senior citizens home.

The Greening of Mrs. Edmiston

BY
ROBIN SCOTT WILSON

Mrs. Edmiston awoke one Tuesday morning late in May with a throbbing toothache at a spot on her lower right gum that, so far as she knew, had been uninhabited by teeth since she had gotten her partial in 1985. She confirmed the swelling with her tongue, more bemused than pained by the unfamiliar but unforgotten sensation.

"Rats," she said as she eased her thin frame out from under the fine percale that had been last Christmas's gift from her Granddaughter the Astronaut, always to be distinguished in conversation with the other Crestview residents from her Granddaughter the Surgeon at Johns Hopkins and her Granddaughter the Surgeon at Georgetown and her Grandson the CPA and — in season — Tight End for the Forty-Niners. She knew she bragged too much about her grandchildren, but she compensated by listening intently to the tales of others, quite aware that such exchanges of boredom are the emotional currency of senior citizenship.

"Rats and rats again," she said, wrapping herself in the child's robe that fit her better than anything she had ever bought at Bonwits. "At least half a day shot getting a ride into Chico and waiting for the damn dentist." Mrs. Edmiston allowed herself a modicum of solitary speaking aloud; what the hell, she was old enough. But she didn't overdo it, and now continued her monologue silently.

I don't want to take the time away from the project. They may not yet have everything they need. There's too much to do for Frank alone. It's nearly time for the big test, and they may need me. And, oh God, it is good to be needed! But I'd better get it tak-

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en care of; it could get worse.

As she predicted, it took half a day before she was admitted to the dentist's chair at the university clinic in Chico. "How are you today, ah, Ellen?" said the dentist, glancing at her appointment card. "I'm Dr. Ziff. Open wide, please."

Mrs. Edmiston did not open wide. "What's your first name, Dr. Ziff?" she said evenly. Ziff lowered his mirror. "Why, ah, William. Why do you ask?"

"Because if I'm going to be Ellen to you, you're damn well going to be Billy Boy to me." And with this, she sank back into the chair, closed her eyes with the patience that is one of the few blessings of age, and parted her lips as widely as she could.

As always, her mind fled the indignities of dentists and gynecologists and other necessary probers of orifices, and she rehearsed to herself the strange and surprising adventures of the past three weeks, unquestionably the most exciting period of her life since the early years of love and marriage and childbearing. And maybe even more exciting than that.

The advent had been a Friday morning earlier in the month, initially like every other Friday morning in May in the six years she had been at Crestview Manor. She awoke to perform her usual cheerful inventory of geriatric complaints: the arthritis in her left elbow; the knees that seemed locked into an angle suitable only for fetuses; the dry, itching place between her shoulder blades; the rheumy eyes. She went down the list in a manner not the least hypochondriacal, simply making sure that there were no new afflictions, no novel warning signs of the additional deterioration that was sure, eventually, to come.

She was reminded, mornings, of something from one of her brief flings at independence, this one after the kids had gone and when Hank had taken on the deanship and smothered himself with work and saddled her with tedious new social responsibilities, and she had taken up flying — as if, by challenging gravity for a while, she could escape everything else mundane in her life. Now she saw her morning ritual as a preflight run-up checklist. Carburetor heat on; flaps ten degrees; mags right and left O.K.; mixture full rich; prop flat pitch; altimeter set.

As on most May mornings, Mrs. Edmiston went directly from her habitual domestic breakfast conversation with her friend Frank Brewer to her garden, a three-by-six plot directly under the window of her room to which she had laid claim with such ferocity that both the home administrator and Mexican groundsmen had capitulated despite clear policy to the contrary.

"Most intensively cultivated land in northern California," she once remarked to Frank. "More intensive than

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anything in China or those L-5 hydroponics we've been reading about. Except I don't use night soil."

"Good goddamn thing, too, Ellie," said Frank. "If you expect me to eat your veggies." His big, square, craggy face lit up with a leer they both sometimes wished they were hale enough to act on. "I'm fond as hell of that certain air of earthiness about you, babe, and in my long and largely misspent life, I have not been known to be overly fastidious. But I draw the line at cheating at cards, child molestation, reenlistment in any branch of the armed forces, and night soil. Good goddamn thing I'm out of the air force and you're no child anymore." The leer.

Eighteen square feet of rich, sunny *viña* loam, the garden contained — in May — early bell peppers, just flowering; the last of the peas, their vines yellowing and dry; young bush beans that would ripen in July, and tomatoes: Tiny Tims that would cluster in August like red grapes, Big Boys that cracked or got blossom-end rot if you weren't careful, and late Roma Plums that Mrs. Edmiston would have planned to use for spaghetti sauce in September — had she still had a kitchen to cook in.

And then, startlingly that early May morning, there was something very different in the garden. Denting lightly into the fine, loose soil so intimately cultivated by the frail old woman, so free of the detritus of fallen leaves, pebbles, the fallout of a generous biome, lay a long, slender, gleaming metallic cylinder, symmetrically conical at both ends, a curious splinter of the golden Sierra sunlight.

Her first thought: An absurdly plump knitting needle, but I've never seen one as thick as a. . . . She shrank from the memory with a rueful inner chuckle. Her second thought: Something has dropped from one of those planes shooting touch-and-goes at Beale Air Force Base. Her third thought: It is a strange thing and beautiful; and I think somehow damaged and not like anything anyone on Earth has seen before; and it may be dangerous to me, but I must have it to myself to look at more closely.

Her hands trembling with excitement, she knelt beside the strange object, scraping soil away until she could grasp it at either end and heave it free. It was astonishingly heavy. Things have a kind of natural density, she thought. I have never lifted anything this small that weighed this much. But it is not too much for me.

She nestled the cylinder carefully in the raffia tote containing her garden tools (gift of Tight End) and — her shoulders aslant, her arm pulled tautly downward, bag bouncing heavily against her right knee — she carried it to her sunlit room, there to place it gingerly on the table where she did needlepoint, under the illuminated magnifying glass clamped at the edge (gift of Georgetown Surgeon).

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Handwork, like gardening, was important to Mrs. Edmiston, the play of design and fingers and silken thread and needle like the magic of seed and sunshine and water and soil. The Crestview management barely tolerated her garden; they found it harder still to tolerate the intricate needlepoint that, appearing framed on the walls of some of the more irreverent inhabitants, announced in spectacular colors such sentiments as "IT'S 2001 AND THE CHILIASTS WERE FULL OF CRAP AGAIN!" Or, as throw pillows: "I GOT STUFFED AT CRESTVIEW MANOR!"

Of the cylinder's two-foot length, the six inches under the glass displayed minute pits and scars, the discoloration of heated metal, and an intricate pattern of lines and shadows as fine as the patina on good silver, but without randomness.

Oh, not random at all, thought Mrs. Edmiston, her excitement almost unbearable; not random, but marking out hatches and high-frequency plumbing and docking ports and service wells and the subtle bas-relief of surface-mounted concave antennae. And here and there neat, dark patches where — if her eyes or her magnifying glass were better and she could read the language (if indeed there were a language) — there would almost certainly be stenciled something like "NO STEP" or "USE JP 86 FUEL ONLY."

She found Frank asleep by the pool in his wheelchair. He swam to exhaustion every morning as if determined to underscore the contrast between his muscular torso and his wasted legs. He was fond of saying, "Hell, everything important on me still works fine. I just have trouble making home deliveries anymore."

He awoke at her touch, coming instantly alert as men do who have served with great success in professions that exact heavy penalties for failure to do so. "Frank, can you come to my room with me? I want to show you something. I need. . . ." Her voice broke with excitement.

His leer was cheerfully goatish. "Goddamn, Ellie. I been waiting three years for this. Stand out of my way!" One powerful pump of his thick shoulders drove the chair across the pool patio toward the hallway leading to Mrs. Edmiston's room. She came after at the closest thing to a trot she could manage. She caught up with him at her door, unlocked it, and pointed wordlessly to the worktable and the cylinder.

Frank wheeled forward, adjusted the magnifying glass, and peered intently for what seemed to Mrs. Edmiston minute after minute. At last he whistled softly, one long, drawn-out note. "It really is, isn't it, Ellie?" he said, peering back and a little up at her; seated, he was nearly as tall as she was standing. "It's not some gimmick your Astronaut Granddaughter sent you. It's not something anybody I know of could make or fake. I mean, we could kid ourselves and say, 'Jeez,

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what a great model some kid's built,' but we're too old to jerk ourselves around with phony incredulity."

She thought him especially wise. She said, "I remember Hank back in the eighties when he had retired as dean and was trying to get back into teaching math, and the stuff that whats his name, Mandelbrot, was preaching, the fractal thing, was the new buzz word. I don't think I could be such a quick believer if I hadn't heard so much about symmetry of scale. That's what this is, isn't it, Frank? I mean, if this thing were three blocks long and as big around as a 787, we'd believe it right away, wouldn't we?"

Frank nodded, his thick mop of silver a reminder to her of Hank's early baldness and how it had pained him. "We believe it," he said. "It could be illusion. Someone's clever trick. I've been fooled plenty of times before. But this. . . ." He lifted one end of the cylinder, felt its unnatural heft. ". . . this is no illusion, I think."

He rotated half a wheel-turn back from the worktable to face her. "But now what to do about it? It could be dangerous. Why is it here? If it is what it looks like, a little bitty goddamn" — he found the word difficult to articulate — "*spaceship,* then what's in it? What does what's in it want? Conquest? Help? Gold doubloons and rum and nubile native maidens?" The goatish leer.

"What do we have to lose if we find out?" Mrs. Edmiston's voice was soft, almost inaudible.

He looked at her: the osteoporotic hump and thin arms; the sweet, lined face he had come to love in a quiet, undemanding way; the face now animated with an excitement he had not seen before. He said, "let's see if we can send these folks a message."

Mrs. Edmiston grinned with new complicity. "Yes! How about three taps with a pencil? Third planet and so forth. I bet I've read that a million times in science fiction."

"Naw." Frank shook his head. "I doubt they give a rat's ass about which planet we are, in which obscure star system. We just need to let them know that *someone's* here who's reasonably intelligent and that we're ready to deal, to help them or procure maidens and rum or pelts or whatever the hell they're after."

"Da da da, dum," hummed Mrs. Edmiston. "The Beethoven Fifth Symphony thing. V for victory back during the war. The musical notes ought to convince them that we're out of the Neolithic."

"Talk about Neolithic! You have to be as old as we are to say 'the war' and mean World War II. But then, I guess in a way these folks are that old."

"How so?"

"Assume they've known they were on their way here, by accident or otherwise; they've had — say — some eighty or ninety light-years of radio broadcasts to pass through and learn

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from. When did widespread commercial radio begin, 1920 or so? Eighty-five or so years ago? And then television since the forties. Depending on how far they've come from and how fast and how smart they are, they could know an awful lot about us."

"Indeed we do," said a tiny, tinny voice, monotonic but not mechanical. "And we do not threaten you but ask your help in effecting the repairs we must make. We depend upon the goodwill that seems to be a part of your culture. We believe we can pay in appropriate currency."

Frank said, "Goddamn, Ellie!"

And then he said, turning back to the magnifying glass and the tinny voice there, "If you aren't buying doubloons and rum and nubile maidens, are you selling?"

And thus did the three weeks begin. Both old people were taxed by the demands of the tinny voice. Frank made dozens of surreptitious trips to the maintenance shop and the pharmacy and the laundry, where he stole minute amounts of WD-40, Clorox, gasoline, Lubriplate, distilled water, and a hundred other compounds — most, he noted, complex hydrocarbons — filling empty prescription bottles begged from puzzled acquaintances all over Crestview. He pocketed copper brads, snippets of galvanized screen wire, a broken digital multimeter, solder, the filament from a shattered light bulb, and delivered all to the worktable in Mrs. Edmiston's room.

More mobile, Mrs. Edmiston took the bus into the Oroville shopping mall every other day with lists of items. She bought carbon tetrachloride and trisodium phosphate and non-iodized salt and Adolph's Meat Tenderizer and monosodium glutamate and penlight batteries. She became expert at reading labels. Her own diamond engagement ring joined the growing litter on the worktable, and one night she sat with Frank as a crew of Okanai — working under the bright little lights they had rigged beneath the magnifying glass — disassembled the ring and gingerly edged its modest thirty-three-point stone in through the largest cargo hatch. It did not occur to her to feel regret or nostalgia, although she would not have parted with her wedding band, worn to delicate thinness, for any cause.

And all too often, after the Okanai had tested one of their offerings, the tinny voice would announce that it was not quite right for their purposes, and perhaps the Maalox that Mrs. Edmiston had mentioned would provide the correct chemical structure, or the pen points Brewer had described might have the proper metallurgy, and off they would go again foraging.

Late — after the nightly session with the tinny voice as they tried to

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translate his needs into materials they knew were available to them, after the sometimes onerous chore of disposing of the incredible quantity of waste the project generated, before Frank wheeled off to hoist himself, exhausted, into bed — late they would smile at each other and wonder when and how it would all end, not really caring so long as it lasted just a little longer, knowing that nothing so incredibly interesting would ever happen to them again.

"Interesting — ah — Mrs. Edmiston," said Dr. Ziff. "I've honestly seen nothing like it. I need to study the X-rays, but it looks like you've got an unusual kind of, ah, odontoblast developing there. It can't be, of course. Has to be an underdeveloped and undescended third molar — ah, wisdom tooth, that is — that's migrated over."

"How so? I'm pretty sure I had them all removed when I was really quite young, in my twenties."

"Has to be a wisdom, Mrs. Edmiston." Ziff grinned patronizingly. "Unless you have just turned six and are cutting your first permanent molar."

So that's the reward, the appropriate currency, thought Mrs. Edmiston on the Elders' bus whining back up from the hot valley to Crestview. That explains the weight I've been putting on, the way I've been sleeping ten or twelve hours at a time, smoother skin, the new tenderness. . . . She pinched a fold of wrinkled skin over the knuckle on her ring finger, released it, and watched it drop slowly but certainly back with gratifying elasticity.

"But will they know when to stop?" she said quietly to herself. "And what's happening to Frank?"

She arrived back at Crestview just as the first dinner serving was coming to a close. She hurried through the line, heaping a tray to meet her unaccustomed appetite, and sought Frank in their usual corner. He greeted her by half-rising from his wheelchair, one thin leg braced against the table, and throwing a strong arm around her slender shoulder. "How was the dentist? Any problems?"

"Forget the dentist! What's with you, standing up like this?"

"Well, goddamn, Ellie, I don't know. I been feeling pretty good lately, and maybe the therapy is working."

"What therapy? You haven't had any therapy since '98. You told me so yourself."

"Oh yes, I have. For the past three weeks. You have, too, haven't you? Can't you tell? Christ, I can tell just by looking at you!"

She sat then and held his hand as he lowered himself, still with some pain, to his seat. "For the first time, Frankie, I'm scared."

"Why? So what if they're paying us by turning back the damn clock on us? Is there anything else you much want? You up to a translunar cruise if

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they gave us two free tickets? Hell, Ellie, you are getting more good-looking every day, and I'm, well, I'm getting ready for a little of the old home delivery."

If they could bottle that leer . . . ., thought Mrs. Edmiston.

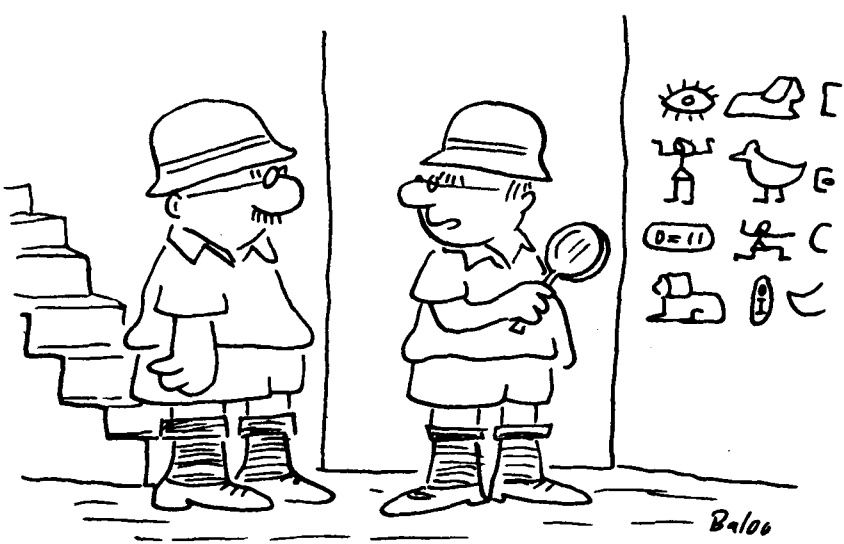
"Oh Frank, are you propositioning me two months after my eighty-third birthday?"

The leer was gone. "No, Ellie. Not propositioning. Proposing."

She had not thought of it. She was not ready for it. She had abandoned such an idea too long ago. She could more readily accept the strangeness of the past three weeks than she could the prospect of . . . something new in her relationship to the world, something beyond handwork and gardening and enshrined memory and a familiar, uncomplicated Frank and Crestview and the slow, dependable drying and hardening of everything.

Could she once again believe in herself as the focus and not just the celebrant of silken thread and sunshine and . . . seed?

She shook her head in confusion. She did not know what she wanted. She knew only that she did not want to, would not at her age, damn it, cut new teeth.



"You're not going to believe this, but it seems to be some sort of Mid-East peace plan."

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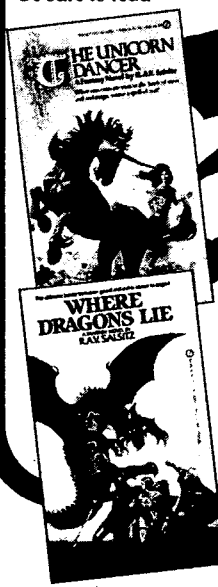

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Interzone, The First Anthology, edited by John Clute, Colin Greenland, and David Pringle, St. Martin's, $14.95

Terry Carr's Best Science Fiction of The Year #15, (1985) Terry Carr, ed., Tor, $3.50

Newsstand-borne science fiction and fantasy, and supernatural-horror fiction, are changing. Taken as a class, all these branches of speculative fiction are moving away from what they were until quite recently. They have of course been in this motion for years, but now the acceleration has taken hold, and suddenly what was the "norm" in types of content, in writing styles and plotting, in thematic content and characterization — the whole shebang — is in a minority position. What was "experimental" is now the norm.

How do I mean? Well, it's not a matter of sheer word-count. The old way of going is still comfortably ahead in terms of word-mass generated day by day. It's a matter of what the leading young writers want to write like, and do write like . . . whom the "hot" editors nurture, and who, in turn, makes those editors the most prominent movers and shakers in the ongoing literature.

Again, that prominence is not expressed in money-mass; old-line policies, such as those at DAW, Del Rey and Baen, are still producing by far the most revenue. They probably will do so for, oh, another ten years at least. And what is more, it seems very

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likely that when they fall behind, percentage-wise compared to the by then no longer new way, the pie will have shrunk. SF will no longer be the leading newsstand literature. This latter is a personal opinion, but it is based on observation of fiction-buyer behavior, not on some aesthetic preference of my own.* It's an opinion I don't like, but I fear it will be proved right, if, in the classic SF phrase, *if* this goes on. . . .

Now, that's a lot of bombs to throw. Let's look at how Budrys came to this inflammatory condition, his reasoning:

Let's first divide this up. Although I have brought books into this — in effect, reprint and original paperback books, since trade first editions are statistically insignificant in our overall market — and although those books sell beside the magazines, the place to look for trends is in periodical media. I'm not convinced that magazines are purchased for exactly the same purpose as books are. I think a magazine buyer expects and by financial contribution nurtures new talent, and ipso facto, positively desires attempts at change. I think books are bought more often for comfortable fulfillment of established expectations. So we will talk mostly about magazine SF, and then, hopefully, tie it in to the larger universe of our literature.

Hugo Gernsback's promulgation of *Amazing Stories* in the 1920s is the most crucial single incident, arguably, in the history of speculative fiction. It focalized a major development in the form, at a crucial time. While they were on the rise, it wedded all the energies and talents that conjoin in the cultural response we now call the SF community. We are doing only what is proper when we honor him; not only for his sake, but in the sense that we simultaneously recognize and pay our respects to the response.

The cultural pressure toward the creation of SF periodicals, and the Science Fiction League,* had been mounting since the middle of the nineteenth century.

Mary Shelley had demonstrated in 1818 that you could make a smash

*My personal aesthetic preference is for the novels and short fiction of Algis Budrys.

**This was Gernsback's device for franchising organized groups of readers around the U.S.A. It worked for him only in a few urban localities. The fact that it worked at all testifies to the readiness of early SF readers to form a community. Strong traces of the SFL per se remain, particularly in New York and Philadelphia, and in the organization called First Fandom. But all organized activities by SF consumers, including those in such bodies as the National Fan Federation, the Fantasy Amateur Press Association, Advent: Publishers and your personal circle of correspondents and convention-attendance pals, derive from the SFL and the impulses it derived from.*

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best-seller out of *Frankenstein*, thus revealing two seminal facts: One, that western civilization was eagerly ready for a newly phrased set of questions about what humanity is and what is mindful of it, and, Two, that there could be a literature of science fiction, clearly related to fantasy but separate from it on this matter of what clockwork ticks for thee and me.

But literate western civilization at that point constituted an aristocracy of those who could afford books and had the requisite sophistications. Set aside from it, by economic circumstance and, in parts of the world including most of rural America, set against it by a cultural bias against secular recreational reading, was the far larger mass of citizenry. The U.S.A. at that time was in fact the paramount western example of an agricultural nation committed to a dawn-to-dusk circadian rhythm, to hustling children into the labor force, and to brief educations controlled by local school boards dedicated to maintaining economically appropriate standards of truncation.*

Shortly thereafter, as the industrial revolution took hold, things changed. They changed in the classic human manner. That is to say, rather than mitigate existing undesirable cultural features, social applications of the new technologies superimposed a magnified structure of evolved forms. For example in England, child labor appeared in barrack-like ranks of factories. In certain social strata throughout the civilized world as we understood it, any literacy beyond the barely functional became not merely difficult but prohibitive.

Even as the surviving children aged into the ranks of apprentice artisans and/or urbanized proto-mobs, their literacy was inevitably different from the scope made available by aristocratized university education. But they represented an enormous market, and the increasingly high-speed, high-capacity printing presses were ready for them.

In this farrago of economic determinism, too, it is good for our souls to remember that the human being is inevitably, fluently drawn to the arts. There is no known thinking organism that does not ornament, exaggerate, and otherwise re-order common reality, producing a form of commentary on it. This is, think on it, often the measure by which we determine whether something does think, and the extent to which it thinks. So if mass literature was ready to be produced, so, too, were the masses ready for it.

The feature-ridden nineteenth century newspaper and the dime novel, and their subject-matter, tone, vocabulary and politics, are commensurate

And to this day, the U.S. primary and secondary school systems remain first a disastrous attempt to habilitate students to the society, and a jackleg by-the-way to education second.

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with their origins. Regarded anthropologically, they are enshrinements of the ethic of readin' and 'riting and 'rithmetic taught to the tune of a hickory stick, and the fundamentalist doctrines that strove to make back-breaking labor and unaristocratic status palatable.*

What we have come to call the Judeo-Christian ethic — that thing elaborated from the writings of a harassed people and the ministers who discovered and preached a glorious but absolutist mitigation of their torment — thus seems to me inextricable from nineteenth century mass literature and its evolved form, pulp fiction.

Nominally named only for its cheap paper, but readily burdenable with invidious connotations of the epithet, pulp is the fiction of just desserts plainly delivered. The popularity of Horatio Alger's sweat-and-rectitude stories, of the uncomplicated landscape of Tarzan's Africa, and of the comforting presence of omnipotent avengers like Doc Savage, Sam Spade and James Bond, are seeable as all one. What is also seeable as the nineteenth century rotated into the twentieth was the increasingly heady promise of everyman as his own avenger, did he but equip himself with appropriate material and philosophical technologies. It was the way out of the tenement and into the tract house. Jules Verne had already ridden that pressure-front into "worldwide" — read monotheist industrialized — acclaim, nearly every populist writer from Poe onward made stabs at it, and H.G. Wells brought it to a puissant philosophical *floreat*. Some have never forgiven him for that.

The trouble with all of Wells's work, including the nonfiction, is that it is pulp-ethical. You can bring the genius out of the petit bourgeoisie, but you cannot brush all of the shine off his blue serge. Those of us who devoured library copies of C.S. Lewis's and Aldous Huxley's SF as avidly as we went to *The Time Machine* may have been blissfully unaware of the extent, tenacity, and affronted bitterness of Wells's intellectual enemies in Britain. But he was a living affront, and to some, particularly in England, he and his ethic remain so. As a consequence, his intellectual heir, the mighty John W. Campbell, Jr., editor of Street & Smith's *Astounding Science Fiction* and foremost promulgator of periodical SF, remains not merely quirky, as he is in U.S. SF iconography, but outright anathema.

U.S. newsstand SF, as Campbell made it during his mid-century life

**You can see these things, still plain and in fact resurgent, in any supermarket checkout-counter "newspaper." There are startling parallels between their content and that of the crumbling, yellow, hundred-year-old periodicals which, a mere few decades ago, some of us thought had been left behind forever.*

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and as he shadowed it into the future, is Wellsian in the sense that it deals with technology as a liberator of the man willing to devote himself to it. Furthermore, that premise is cast into plot structures which, for all their greater or lesser subtleties of decoration, didactically treat with a universe in which the more intense rectitudinous application of the sweat-ethic wins out over the less. In the case of Campbellian SF, much of Wells's cautionary content — see *The Invisible Man*, and also consider Morlock technology — is elided. (No surprise — Huxley and Lewis also overlooked it in Wells; in Lewis's case, viciously and perhaps even deliberately so, although Lewis elsewhere than in *That Hideous Strength* is a sapient and compassionate author.) The sweat in Campbell-influenced SF, too, is often within the brow. But the reason why pulp of any sort is immensely popular but is considered "different" from "real literature," why pulp writers are despised in most university contexts or at best patronized — and the reason why so many pulp-influenced writers almost inevitably come to even overt religious speculation — now seems quite understandable.

The snobbery of what considers itself the best academe is, of course, met with a reverse snobbery, and much heat is generated thereby, as are stiff silences. But at the same time, each side is fascinated with the other. On what we might call the academic side, there *is* the study of "popular culture," and with it, among those exposed to university thinking, notably in the U.K., there is the tendency, even among SF practitioners and appreciators, to regard the literature as a form of play, and to value visible intellection . . . in particular, apt verbal constructs and their imitation.

On what has to be called the "traditional" side, particularly in the U.S., there is a curious duality. On the one hand, there is a vast fondness for the sweat-born artistic signatures of one's youthful reading and writing. On the other is the fact that even such a hoary figure as I came on the scene too late to escape exposure to what universities consider real literature, and to hunger for appreciation in that universe. Bit by bit, as the technological optimism of Gernsback's day breaks up under such shocks as the overnight creation of a world replete with tech-borne death, and the even more effective erosions produced by perceived ethical breakdowns in the military-industrial complex and its ministers, SF writing has tended toward non-Campbellian forms.

The revelation that there *were* considerable non-Campbellian forms was, of course, first delivered from England by what was dubbed the New Wave in the late 1950s. Probably the most effective instrument of

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that delivery was the periodical *New Worlds* magazine, many of whose brightest stars and earliest readers now constitute the U.K. SF establishment. Their artistic influence on young — or still developing — SF writers everywhere has become increasingly evident. It is not necessarily true that academe-influenced SF writing is the best new writing. But now, clearly, it has become the best-considered writing.

The place where this appears most clearly is, as I said, in the periodicals. These have, not insignificantly, overwhelmingly switched their economic base to subscribers — that is, investors — as distinguished from the newsstand impulse buyers who support the books and who not all that long ago constituted some eighty percent of U.S. magazine readership. This controversion has been attributed to a variety of economic factors; I think now it has a great deal more to do with artistic evolution at the cutting edge of the form.

Clearly at the cutting edge of the form is *Interzone*, the successor periodical to *New Worlds*. Of the three editors listed for its anthology, John Clute will be famliar to you if for nothing else then for his occasional in-depth critical reviews in this space some years ago, and David Pringle is heavily associated with *Foundation*, the prestigious U.K. university-based periodical of SF criticism and forensics. The stories in the book are copyright 1982-4, and their authors include J.G. Ballard and Keith Roberts from among long-term U.K. writers, Cherry Wilder who is perceived as a U.K. writer, Malcolm Edwards, who has long been a leading figure in the U.K. SF community, and nine other writers who classify either as recognized leading new talents or are likely destined for that recognition. Among them are three Americans — John Shirley, Scott Bradfield, and Michael Blumlein. All of them, whether U.K. resident or not, clearly belong in this book.

The only possible exception is Keith Roberts, with "Kitemaster," an evocative and powerful creation in his *Kiteworld* universe. It is, however, a mystifying one when standing alone like this, because although all its signatures are Campbellian, as Roberts's work has always carried them, it is ultimately impossible to reason out what is actually happening or why. This trait may be what made it attractive to *Interzone's* editorial collective, because an antipathy for rounding-off the plot with a Campbellian summary of cause-and-effect is the pervasive signature of all the other material here.

In his Introduction, Clute says, "Here are thirteen stories about the way things are going," and goes on to praise SF for continuing to see the world as "addressable," in the face of a vast desuetude and disillusion in the

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rest of modern fiction. And this is clearly what he believes, having looked around him at the world and its arts with a sharp and sophisticated mind. A Campbellian would be appalled by the pessimistic and unrounded terms in which these stories represent that optimism and express their addresses. He — almost surely he — would find them profoundly unethical. But Campbellians do not count for much anymore at the cutting edge.

For those who would like to list other attackable features of this best of *Interzone*, there is the eyebrow-raising persistence of John Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe as ikons dominating the minds of U.K. SF writers, and a general inability to not bring Amerika into a story somewhere. But these are largely irrelevant things; such stories as Edwards's "After-Images," Rachel Pollack's "Angel Baby," and Shirley's "What Cindy Saw" fully validate the viability and power of what is going on in *Interzone* and its burgeoning subset of the community. This is a book you must have, and if it leads you to subscribe to the magazine, if only to find out what the next effective attack on tradition is, then that will do you no harm, either.

I took up Terry Carr's best-of-the-year collection for deliberate contrast. Not only is Carr a towering figure among SF editors in the U.S., his annual Bests have always scored high in pulse-fingering. And what I found is that in many ways the two collections are as one.

Ian Watson's "The People On The Precipice" is in fact from *Interzone*. Very much like *Interzone* stories are John Crowley's "Snow," Gregory Benford's "Of Space/Time and The River," and Karen Joy Fowler's "Praxis." All of these, like the ones I singled out from the *Interzone* book, share the common property of being metatechnological. Edwards's, for instance, is about life going on briefly in a time-warp at the slowly advancing edge of a fusion blast in London; Benford's is a diary written by a victim of the actual kidnap of Egypt and the imposition of a restored dynastic theology by an ultratechnological alien culture.

Even the more Campbellian stories — Robert Silverberg's "Sailing to Byzantium," for instance, or David Zindel's "Shanidar" — are far out on an edge Campbell did not much like his writers treading. A culture so advanced as to make metamorphosis not only easy but the solution to the problem . . . that verges on blasphemy, for all that Campbell published Eric Frank Russell's "Metamorphosite." Russell's was of the right sort; Silverberg's and Zindel's are, I think, not (in Campbellian terms. On their own terms, they're more than fine. The Silverberg won the Nebula Award; "Shanidar" immediately netted its author a contract for a novel.)

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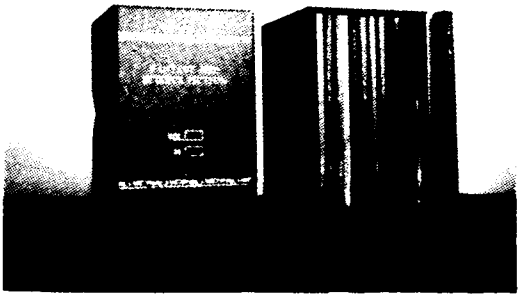
Again, a book you should have. (And containing Lucius Shepard's "A Spanish Lesson" and James Tiptree, Jrs.'s "The Only Neat Thing to Do" from these pages.)

I am struck by the fact that Zindel and Karen Joy Fowler are (A) discoveries of the Writers of The Future program, (B) were two of the five nominees for the John Campbell award for best new writer of 1985, and (C) are being pushed into writing books as soon as possible. Fowler even has a collection of her short work, *Mechanical Things*, from Bantam, in advance of any novel but surely an inducement from its publisher. Considering that neither of these authors had reached the public eye at all until last year, what we have here is a token of the ferocious velocity which things have now attained.

It is noteworthy that the book market is yielding to this new way. Slowly, as yet. But when it does yield, it will have to walk carefully.

You were waiting for me to say whether I think this development is good or bad for SF. I think SF can take care of itself. What I also think is that when the book market adopts the trappings of the present short-story market, it will have abandoned its lucrative roots. Do I think *that* will be bad or good? Well, it will be bad for the market. But in the long evolving history of speculative fiction, that, too, is an incident.



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Our town dump is rather a benign spot, but things are evidently different in Ian Watson's neighborhood. In any event, Mr. Watson has considered the matter of rubbish and come up with this dark vision of a trip to the junkyard. . . .

Salvage Rites

BY
IAN WATSON

Tim and Rosy had cleared out their spare room ruthlessly. They had almost emptied it of the various categories of things that haunt spare rooms: surplus things, fatigued things, souvenir things, exiled things, scraps of things, things that might conceivably be repaired or cannibalized, things that might one day come in handy — all the time vault of twenty years.

"Trouble with being poor," Rosy said while they were loading the car, "is the way you store rubbish like treasure." As if she blamed him for the accumulation.

"We aren't exactly poor," Tim said awkwardly. "Compared with, say, someone in Africa, we're well-off. We get by."

Yes, they got by, on the income from the grocery shop. They were able to pay the interest on their debts, which lodged with them like a greedy, infirm uncle; like a senile, crippled mother who stopped them from ever going on holiday. Tim's poetry earned a bit of extra money. His short, fierce lyrics could be roughed out during slack half hours — jotted down like customers' grocery lists — then polished before bed. Two small collections had been published and well-received. And of course he was working on his sustained mock-epic set in an imaginary Central European country, forever adding ten lines, crossing out five. The country in question needed to be imaginary since he and Rosy couldn't afford to travel abroad.

"Modern life is rubbish," said Rosy. "I saw that sprayed on the front of the cinema. It's perfectly true."

"It's the fault of the recession," he replied.

"It always costs more to be poor,

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doesn't it? We buy the cheapest, so it's trash. We wear clothes from charity shops, so we look like paupers and people try to swindle us. The poor always rob the poor. This car's a heap of junk; it costs more to keep on the road than a Rolls."

Their car was over ten years old, and rust was eating the bottoms of the doors. The hydraulics of the hatchback had failed; thus the hatch had to be propped up with a broom handle when open. The erratic engine guzzled oil.

When the car, with its rear seats lowered, had been crammed with offcuts of carpet, underfelt, old curtains and coats, bags of lank sweaters and sad shoes, tatty toys, a sick television set, and such, Tim felt oddly refreshed and clean. Whenever he scraped out the last smears of marmalade or pickle from a jar, whenever he emptied out a cereal box, he would feel a similar minor surge of satisfaction, as though now something new and different might happen. Freud might explain this as a babyish pleasure in the expulsion of feces. True, Freud also spoke about anal retention. Next to nothing had been retained in the spare room.

The clear-out coincided with Daughter Emma's departure to college. Her choice of geography to study wasn't so much a poignant comment on her parents' immobility as due to geography being regarded academically as an easy option. Emma would probably become an underpaid teacher in a mediocre school; she might marry another teacher. Emma didn't know this yet. Kids were as bouncy as bunnies, before the fox ate them or the winter froze them. Nature pumped the hormone of optimism into each generation. In recent years, Tim had reconciled himself at last to dwelling in the geography of the imagination.

So the house above the shop was doubly empty. It was empty of accumulated clutter; and empty of Emma. Sadly, yet somehow refreshingly empty, like the late-autumn Sunday itself. The sun shone brightly on the empty street. People were still in bed, sleeping in. But the public dump five miles away would be open. Dawn till dusk.

"Junk," repeated Rosy. Tim hoped she wasn't going to turn bitter when it came time to throw their past away.

He removed the broom handle, let the hatchback slam itself, and patted it reassuringly. "Don't discourage the old thing."

Rosy plucked at a loop in her saggy sweater and eyed a box of Emma's childhood toys inside.

"Well, we've got rid of her at last," she said, apparently changing the subject. "Now we can start living, I suppose. If we still know how. Before we're too old."

Automatically, Tim smoothed his hair around the tonsure of his bald patch. They climbed into the car

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which started without too much fuss.

As they drove off, Rosy said, "If we won a fortune, I shouldn't be able to spend it, you know. I could never bring myself to buy a coat at *new* prices. Or a meal in a restaurant. Or a proper hairdo. It would seem obscene. I've been trained."

"Me, too. I wonder how we'd win a fortune." He spoke flatly, not asking. Most houses and gardens they passed were blank and lifeless, but one man was out washing a car with last year's registration. Tim hardly knew what model it was. He failed to imagine himself driving it. He and Rosy had originally started the shop with help from parents, back in the days when he had dreamed of becoming an internationally regarded poet who traveled places. Parents were now all dead. Legacies had gone to assuage the upward-creeping debts.

"Beautiful day."

Rosy said nothing in reply. She pulled down the sun visor briefly and sought wrinkles in the mirror on the back.

"My hair needs cutting," she said presently.

"*Go* to a hairdresser's," he murmured.

"I'll do it myself. As usual."

Tim thought he needed a haircut, too. When you wore cheap old clothes, short hair was best.

"The roots are showing," she said.

"That's fashionable nowadays. Look, you said we ought to start living. If you couldn't ever splash out in a restaurant, how can we start living? A bit of a contradiction, isn't it?"

"An economic contradiction. Why should we have to own a shop? The state should own everything. There shouldn't be private cars, either. There should be enough good buses and railways."

"True. But there aren't. The services have been castrated."

A poem occurred to him: about eunuchs in Arabian robes driving harems of passengers who peered not through windows but through intricate lattices.

The dump would be open today because the dump was a market, too. A bazaar, of sorts. Just as charity shops sprouted like fungi in any temporarily empty commercial premises in town, selling the rags of richer people to poorer people to send aid to the totally poor in the Third World, so, with the deliberate decline of the economy, rubbish dumps had changed their nature. Concessionnaires bid for the salvage rights. Anything reusable was sold back to the public. Ecological recycling? Logic of poverty? One or the other.

Tim and Rosy had visited the dump outside town a year before and bought a washing machine for a song. The machine worked for three months before breaking down. Cheaper than renting with an option to buy. Now the carcass, with holes cut in it, acted as a compost bin in their patch of back

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garden. According to gossips visiting the shop, the dump had since undergone a further metamorphosis. A hot-drink vending machine had been installed so that browsers could refresh themselves with a plastic cup of coffee. That summer an ice cream van had visited the dump most weekends.

"Next thing," he said, "people will be having picnics at the dump. There'll be a play area for kids. Tours of the infill. Bulldozer rides. Dèjeuner sur le dump."

"What?"

"The Manet painting. Imagine that fellow and his naked mistress sitting on the dump drinking champagne. I presume she'd have to wear a bikini."

A poem? "Manet at the Dump." Maybe. What word rhymed with "rubbish"?

Driving along the two-lane road between the first plowed empty fields of the countryside, Tim spotted a cloud of gulls milling in the sky over the sprawling infill acres of the dump, like so many scraps of white paper. Rusty corrugated iron sheets walled off the visitors' zone.

Which they entered, in low gear, the suspension creaking ominously as the car humped itself over the sleeping-policeman ramp.

A large concrete yard was lined with bulky rubbish bins into which their car could probably have fit. Down one side the high bins were already loaded with rubble. Those along the opposite side were empty; however, most were roped off with a notice prohibiting use. An arrow pointed to the far end, where several bins stood behind notice boards indicating "glass," "garden refuse," "metal." Those bins were already full; sunlight glared from a pile of windows.

A battered bulk-shipping container the size of a railway carriage blocked the view beyond, though another mounted wooden arrow pointed behind it.

Nearer to hand stood a black oil sump, and a bottle bank painted camouflage green that resembled an armored car, with slots for clear and colored bottles reminiscent of muzzles from which howitzer shells could be fired. A score of ripped-off doors were stacked against one end.

Tim stopped the car by a truck trailer that was packed with a mound of old clothes and rags. Shirt sleeves hung down as if they had tried to climb out and failed, all the breath crushed out of them.

Beside this trailer, another huge shipping container, open at one end, was labeled "shop." Within, Tim saw clothes on racks, shelves of paperback books, electrical goods. A fat, vacant-faced woman of indeterminate middle age, wearing a pink parka, occupied a deck chair outside. The shop forecourt displayed collections of tools, lamp bases and shades, mirrors, ambiguous metal paraphernalia, a

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cocktail cabinet with the veneer peeling.

Inside a makeshift pen, cobbled together from car roof racks, an Alsatian guard bitch woke to life when Tim opened his door. The powerful animal reared, barking, raving.

"Jilly!" screamed the fat woman. She ignored Tim. The Alsatian slumped, and whined.

Apart from their own car, the yard was deserted. Too early in the day, perhaps. By this afternoon the bazaar of rubbish might be buzzing; then the beast wouldn't be on edge. Tim stepped nervously round to the hatchback, raised it, and inserted the broom handle. He carried the first plastic bag of clothes to the open trailer, and swung. The bag landed high up the hill of garments, jamming against the roof. He noticed a movement in the inner gloom. Some rags shifting, knocked off balance?

Rosy wound her window down. "Why can't you save the bags?"

"Oh," he said stupidly, measuring the height of the trailer floor, the incline of the clothes hill. Should he climb up and empty the bag? "There's no space left at the front. Our stuff would fall out."

Supposing you tried to repossess a coat you'd thrown away — having changed your mind about discarding it — would the Alsatian be within its rights to rip your throat out? Because you no longer owned that coat? A sign fixed to the dog pen forbade visitors from taking anything, except by way of the shop. Salvage rights had been granted. To a firm called Griffiths Scavenging. Associates of the fat woman in the deck chair.

"Tim, come back here!"

He hurried to the car window.

"Someone inside there," Rosy whispered.

In the dim interior of the trailer, almost hidden by the summit of fabrics, Tim spotted a skinny girl with ratty hair. As he watched, she ripped open the bag he had thrown, and tossed the contents this way and that, examining, sorting.

"It's obscene," said Rosy, "having your socks and knickers picked over before your very eyes."

"Maybe we should have washed all our old clothes before we threw them away?"

"That isn't funny. Find somewhere else, will you? Down there by those signs."

Leaving the hatchback propped, Tim got in and started the engine. He drove down toward the other freight container and followed the arrow round behind it.

Another arrow pointed the way down a long lane lined by bins. As Tim and Rosy entered the lane, shadow fell upon them from the high metal sides and suddenly the day was cold. The occasional freestanding notice announced "plastic," "rubber & tires." As well as being inconveniently tall, the bins were mostly full.

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Heeding a further arrow, he turned the car along a side lane similarly walled with bins and intermittent notices.

"Carpeting," he read. "Here we are. Get rid of *that,* at any rate."

On his second attempt, he managed to raise their rolled threadbare carpet to head height and tumble it over the metal lip. It fell dully within. From the car, he hauled the first bundle of heavy underfelt, which they had stored for years on the off chance.

"That isn't exactly *carpet,"* called Rosy.

"Undercarpet. Same thing. What do they expect? We should sort out everything for them? Bother that. I'll toss the lot in here, clothes and all. Who cares?"

Another plump, empty-faced woman, in raggy woolens and baggy trousers — an obvious sister of the deck chair occupant — squeezed her way from between two bins and stood watching. A boy of five or six in shorts and black zipper jacket followed her, clutching a torn picture book.

Tim walked over to the woman. "Is it all right if I throw underfelt in that one?" Her skin oozed grease.

"Wha'?" she said after a while.

He repeated himself.

"Uh," she said, which might have meant anything. He realized that the woman was stupid, moronic. Maybe she had no connection with Griffiths Scavenging, after all. She might just be wandering around.

"Well, I will, then." So Tim disposed of all the underfelt, awkwardly heaving and hurling aloft while the woman stared silently at him.

He got back into the car. "There'll be bins for clothes and stuff farther on."

True enough. The next arrow directed them into another long, narrow roadway of bins, all brimful of different categories of clothing. Signs were hardly necessary. Suits. Shirts. Skirts. Underwear. Boots and shoes. Buttons; there was even a bin full of buttons, a mountain height of multicolored shingle.

He cruised at walking pace. "Must be their storeroom, hmm? Maybe they export to poor countries. Or places hit by disaster. Cyclones, earthquakes. We oughtn't to have come so far. We should have dumped the lot back in the yard."

A pair of acne-scarred youths in jeans, heavy steel-tipped boots, and bomber jackets emerged. One slapped a hand on the front of the car, forcing Tim to brake. The other strolled grinning round to the open backside.

"Yelp yer, mate?" The youth tore a bag open and pulled out an old skirt of Rosy's. He ran and tossed this up into a bin of skirts, returned and burrowed, while his companion joined him.

"Hey," objected Tim. "Get out of our car. Now."

As though instinctively alert to

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the contents, the youths grabbed the other clothes bags out of the back and ripped them open to sort on the ground. Tim immediately drove on and soon rounded another corner. Yet another lane of bins — all apparently empty — stretched ahead, with an arrow indicating a turning halfway along.

"Stop and reverse," said Rosy. "Go back the way we came."

"We still have the TV to dump, and the —"

"Stop! Back up and turn. Unload the rest in the yard. Anywhere! Drive away. Home."

Home. That house above a shop that fed them and imprisoned them. The house with an empty daughter's room. And now with an empty spare room. Tim experienced an odd feeling of certainty that before leaving that morning they had emptied the entire house — of furniture, stove, refrigerator, everything — and that there was nothing left any longer to connect them to the place. As if they had cleared all the shelves in the shop, too, leaving bare boards. They were free; they had escaped — hadn't they? Something new could begin.

Vacant shop, vacant house, vacant debts. As vacant as this street of empty bins; as vacant as the rear of the car was fast becoming. He wished he had closed the hatchback down. Otherwise something more precious than junk might escape, might be snatched or simply drift away into the chilly air here between these looming steel boxes that mockingly imitated a decrepit city street — from the future, perhaps, after a war.

He halted the car and shook his head to clear a cold fog of apprehension from his brains. Before he could engage reverse gear, he saw in the driving mirror the high front of a truck loom around the corner behind. Piston arms, at attention, dangled chains embracing the steel bin on its flatbed back. Somehow the bin-truck negotiated the turn. He wondered how it could ever maneuver to pick up or deposit any of the bins ranged on either side. Maybe there was a turntable built into the chassis. Standing in the bin as though navigating the vehicle was the moronic woman. Suddenly the sight of her terrified him. The truck slowly approached, and honked.

"It must be one-way-only, Rosy." Tim drove forward to the next intersection and swung down a lane of close-packed bins containing scrap metal. By the time they reached another arrow, and another turn, the bin-truck had already entered the scrap metal street.

Tim took another turn, then another, losing the truck way behind. *If* it had been deliberately following, to begin with.

Arrow followed arrow. Turn followed turn. Lane of bins succeeded lane of bins. Once they turned into the street of clothing bins, yet this

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led to a street of scrap metal bins, not a street where the bins were empty. Unless his memory was deceiving him. No, it wasn't. The clothes bins must have been different ones. They were lost in a maze.

"This is ridiculous," he told Rosy. "There isn't space for all these lanes."

"We've entered the world of rubbish," Rosy whispered back. "Where we've been heading for the past twenty years."

The engine coughed and missed a couple of times. Tim pulled the choke half out, racing the engine, though of necessity still driving slowly.

"It's all this damn crawling in first gear. The plugs soot up."

The very next lane opened into a long concrete yard walled in by bins. It wasn't the yard that housed the shop. Slamming the choke back in, Tim gunned the car toward the arrow marking the exit at the far end, hoping to burn the plugs clean. He braked violently in time to enter the next narrow alley.

Six lanes later the engine quit. Tim couldn't restart the car.

"What do we do now?" asked Rosy.

"Walk. I'll leave the keys in the ignition."

The bins on either side stood shoulder to shoulder. They seemed twice as large as previously. You couldn't even squeeze sideways between bins, though you might just manage to crawl on your belly. The only route was the concrete road.

"I wonder if this was once an old airfield?"

Then Tim remembered the gulls flocking above the infill. But no gulls flapped in the sky now.

"What's in the bins, Tim?"

Not since that second yard had they passed a single sign announcing the contents. He peered up. Suddenly he understood the assorted shapes peering over the lips of the containers.

Car doors.

Farther along . . . a forest of exhaust pipes like several church organs jumbled by a bomb blast.

"Bits of cars," he said, opening his door.

Two lanes later they heard from somewhere behind them the whine of a power tool, then the clanging of metal. He felt sure that their stalled car was being broken up into parts. Taking Rosy's hand, he hurried her onward and along another lane. Faintly, he heard a thump of boots and a silly, idiotic giggling.

Clothes bins again! Jackets, shirts, sandals, nightdresses loomed over bin tops. Before they could reach the next corner, the moronic woman waddled out from it ahead of them. She was accompanied by a big, bony, overall-clad man in his mid-forties, his thick black hair slicked back in waves, his nose an absurdly small squash blob in a large, battered face.

"Yer need a hand, squire?"

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Tim jerked around. One of the youths sat perched on the edge of a shirt bin behind them. The youth dropped to the ground just as his partner came wading over the bin of summer dresses opposite. He leapt down, too.

"Show us the way out of here!" cried Rosy. "No, go away! Leave us alone!"

The two youths rushed and clamped Rosy by the arms. At the same moment the man seized Tim, who struggled uselessly; the grip was like granite.

"Yer need a hand," the youth repeated.

The plump woman ambled forward. While the man manipulated Tim like a toy or a life-size doll, the woman undressed him, taking her time about it, tossing his clothes up into various bins. Soon Tim shivered nakedly, still held tight.

Then it was Rosy's turn.

Their captors led Tim and Rosy, both stripped naked, to the turn and released them, thrusting them into the next steel and concrete lane.

"Ge' on, now, squire!"

The woman and her three companions remained at the intersection, blocking any return to the bins where Tim's and Rosy's clothes and shoes had been discarded. Shaking with cold and shock, Tim and Rosy ran along numbly to the next turn, as much to hide their nakedness from the blankly watchful eyes and chilly breeze as to escape.

Tim's teeth chattered. "We'll f-find something to wear. F-farther on. Any old rags. Or c-curtains."

The bins in this new lane were loaded with sheets of cardboard, rolls of wallpaper, bundles of old magazines. Tim wondered whether he could scale the side of a bin with bare feet. He would have to!

Rosy wailed, "I thought they were going to rape —!" Her breasts bounced. "They did! They did. It was the same."

"Listen, this is all a vicious joke. Next we'll come across some rags to put on. Then we'll reach the yard where the shop is, looking like scarecrows. And we'll find our car waiting for us — with our clothes folded on the seats. Nobody will believe us, but . . . ." He had to believe it. "They could have hurt us. They didn't."

"You think they didn't hurt us? I'm hurt forever."

The bins in the next lane all looked empty; nothing peeped over the tops. Tim rapped his knuckles against several; all rang hollowly. He didn't feel inclined to try to climb, to check.

They walked in cold shade. Whichever direction a lane led, sunlight seemed excluded. At last an arrow pointed the way down between rows of bins full of broken furniture, to a concrete-surfaced yard.

"It's the way out," he said. "We've arrived."

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However, the yard, lined with more giant bins, was only as large as a tennis court, and no arrow pointed to an exit. There was only an entrance. Half of the yard was bathed in sunshine, where Rosy ran to warm herself. Her bare flesh quivering, the breeze still nipped her. Whatever these bins contained couldn't be seen from ground level. A car roof rack rested against one. Side-on, its metal bars were steps.

"I'll see the way out!" Wincing, then planting her feet sideways so as to spread her weight along the thin steel bars, Rosy ascended.

Shading her eyes, she stared around helplessly.

She looked down inside the bin itself. And screamed. Screamed.

Tim scaled the bars; there was room alongside. Clutching her cold shoulders with a chilly arm, he, too, gazed down.

For a few seconds he hardly understood what he saw. A layer of slime-coated Ping-Pong balls? Hundreds of hard-boiled eggs?

No. Eyes. The optic cords sprouted like tiny lengths of electric cord torn out of plugs.

Sheep's eyes? No, he didn't think so. Not the eyes of sheep, or any other animal. Rosy had stopped screaming, out of breath. She shook convulsively, clutching the top of the bin, screwing her own eyes tight shut as if to hide them.

He could see into the neighboring bin as well. A heap of french fries? Baby parsnips? No.

Fingers. Chopped-off human fingers.

He stared wildly around the yard. What did all the other bins hide in their depths? Toes, tongues, lungs? Arms and loins and brains? The parts of the body, sorted out . . . . Yes! He knew this was so, even before the grind of an engine dragged his gaze to the entrance of the little yard.

The bin-truck heaved into view and halted in the entrance, completing the circuit of metal walls. The front jutted sufficiently into the yard that the truck doors would be free to open. Crowded side by side in the cab were the man, at the wheel; the two youths; the moronic woman with her boy on her knee; the blank-faced fat woman in the pink parka; and the skinny, ratty girl. All of the passengers, even the little boy, were clutching assorted tools. Saws. Pincers. A gouge. A small ax.

The truck engine died.

"For God's sake, climb on top, Rosy!! Walk along the side to the bin beyond. We must get out of here."

Beyond the yard for as far as he could see in all directions were endless rows of bins.

Desperately, bruising his naked body, almost crippling a toe, Tim scrambled on top, struggling to balance, half-helping, half-dragging Rosy with him. The top edge was far too narrow ever to walk along with bare

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feet, tightrope-style. Nude, he knew they couldn't even slide along, astride. That would be like riding a blunt steel blade. After a while it would cut up through them, between their legs. Instead he slid down inside, pulling Rosy howling with him.

"We'll climb out the back way into the next one! And the next!"

Jelly lumps squelched underfoot. He skidded in the six-inch-deep pool of eyes and fell, nauseated. Scrambling up, he waded, then leapt at the high rear edge of the bin. He did catch hold, with outstretched fingers, his front smashing against the metal, but he couldn't pull himself up. He hadn't enough of a grip. There was no purchase. His feet were slipping on soft marbles.

"Yer need a hand?"

A crowd of heads popped up behind. Vacant faces smiled vaguely. The man, the women, the youths, the ratty girl, even the little boy.

Hands rose into view, displaying a gouge, an ax, pincers, saws.

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Cooper McLaughlin ("The Black and Tan Man," November 1985) offers a suspenseful new tale about a brotherhood that began a thousand years ago and may still have existed in the 1960s (the author tells us that the historical background is accurate). The story begins with the mystery of a box carved from the metal of a ship from the sky . . .

The Order of the Peacock Angel

BY
COOPER McLAUGHLIN

Major the Honorable Anthony H. E. Morgan slowed his mount to a walk. The silver officer's gorget around his neck was warm to the touch, and under his heavy red coat, sweat dampened his ruffled shirt.

A half mile behind him rose the dust and smoke of the Hounslow Heath encampment where the remnants of King William II's Irish expeditionary army of 1690, now returned to England, were being mustered and reequipped to sail for Holland and the war against Louis XIV of France.

At the top of the hill, he reined to a halt and waited for Senior Sergeant Thomas Bell to catch up. He looked down the road, rutted by the heavy wheels of the artillery trains. Fourteen months ago he had ridden over this very hill, the ink barely dry on his newly purchased king's commission. For a moment he saw the ghost of the young captain he had been, hearing again the far-off sound of regimental pipes and the chorused voices of red-coated men singing "Lillibulero" as they marched through the gates. Now the drums and pipes were stilled. The young captain was gone, his innocence blown away with the acrid clouds of gun smoke over the bloody bogs of Aughrim.

He touched the wax-sealed document in his breast pocket. The letter from his uncle's friend Lord Garnett. It had been sent six weeks ago to Ireland, but by then his regiment had left Limerick and was in transit to England. The letter had reached him by courier from Whitehall this morning. He took the envelope out and looked at the address. *Anthony Morgan, Lord Bellarmine.* His eyes blurred. He could not believe that his scholarly, gentle Uncle Frank was

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dead. Killed in his own home by a common footpad. He sighed and put the envelope back in his pocket. He was now, by right of birth, the fifth Lord Bellarmine. The covering letter from the secretary-at-war released him from his regimental duties. The day after his uncle's funeral, Lord Garnett had been sent to Holland by the king. It was imperative that he return to London and settle the family affairs.

Sergeant Bell clattered up on his left and halted. "Hotter than the bleedin' Great Fire, this is, sir." Bell shifted the heavy, .80-caliber flintlock dragoon's carbine that was slung across his back. He took off his lace-trimmed sergeant's hat and mopped his cropped gray hair with a ragged handkerchief.

Tony Morgan smiled at his sergeant. "You're getting too old for this sort of thing, Bell."

"I am, sir. Been at it since I was a drummer boy of twelve in your father's regiment. Wouldn't be here now if I hadn't promised the old man in his last hour that I'd see you didn't get your silly arse shot off."

"It wasn't the arse I was worried about. . . ."

Bell shook his head. "Time we got out of the soldiering trade, sir. Time you found a nice, fat duke's daughter to breed you up a litter of sons."

Tony sighed and turned in the saddle. "You may be right, Bell," he said, starting down the hill at a walk.

. . .

The sun was low in the sky when they reached High Holborn Street. A soft wind blew up from the Thames, bringing with it the smell of the sea, and partially dissipating the yellow-brown cloud of coal smoke that hung over London.

Holborn was filled with carts, wagons, and sedan chairs. High-priced prostitutes sat in the windows of gentlemen's hairdressing shops, waiting for custom. Their less fortunate sisters, the orange-girls and six-penny whores, worked the street. Hackneys, tin window blinds rattling, pushed through the crowds, their spavined horses flogged on by cursing drivers. Barrowmen, cutpurses, and tract peddlers jammed the road, a human river flowing east.

"Good God! Bell, we'll be days getting through this mob. What's happening, a hanging?"

"It's the Smithfield Fair, sir. They'll be at it all of the night. Follow me, sir. I knows a way around." He spurred his horse through the crowd.

Bell turned into a narrow lane. The upper stories of the houses nearly touched, and a river of sewage flowed down the center of the unpaved lane.

"Watch yer' head, sir. Some old cow will pour a bucket of slops on it," Bell said cheerfully.

"I hope you know where we're going, Sergeant." Tony covered his

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mouth and nose with his handkerchief as he and Bell skirted a reeking pile of fish guts in front of a fishmonger's shop. Men and women in ragged clothes stood aside in sullen silence as the two soldiers rode past.

Bell laughed. "I know this place like my own sweet mother's face. I was born here." Tony followed as they took a sharp left, riding through a pool of slime-green liquid. "My brother has a pub a ways from here. Not really a pub, a dramshop. But he gives fair measure and don't water the gin too much."

Ahead, six men were gathered around a small fire burning in the street. All of them were cloaked and carried wooden clubs. Bell stopped and waited for Tony to come abreast. He nodded toward the men. "That's a bad lot there, sir. They'll be off knocking heads at Smithfield when it gets dark. And they doesn't like the king's soldiers. But there's no danger when you're with me . . . they knows me here. . . ." Tony made no comment about Bell's friendly relations with the natives as he observed him loosen the brace of pistols in his saddle holsters.

As they approached the group, one of the men looked up and stepped into the road. Bell's right hand dropped to the butt of his pistol. There was a click as he pulled the serpentine to full cock. The man raised one hand from under his patched cloak.

"Tommy! Tommy Bell!"

Bell came to a halt and leaned forward. "God's Blood! It's old Skatty. . . . Thought you'd have taken a long drop on a short rope by now, you old thief."

Skatty gave him a gap-toothed smile. "I'm an honest man now, Tommy. Got three girls working for me, I have. Just the trade to ease a man in his old age."

"Sure, I believe you, Skatty. And if I do, so would the king's bailiffs." He nodded toward the other men. "You're all honest men. That's why the lot of you are standing in the road swinging clubs . . . just to keep the rats off."

"Ah. You know how it is, Tommy. A man's got to have a bit of fun. Can't sit about waiting for the girls to bring home a few shillings. Will you be seeing your brother Sam?"

"Not this night," Bell replied. "But you tell him I'm back and I'll be around to see him in a day or so."

Skatty waved them on. "Don't wear that lobster-coat when you come, Tommy. Some might think yer' after deserters, and drop a brick on that thick head." The men at the fire laughed as the two soldiers rode past.

Milford Lane ran north from the brewers and woodmongers wharf on the Thames. Once a squalid alley of brothels and tippling rooms dividing Essex House from the adjoining Arun-

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del House, in 1674 Milford Lane had been converted into a respectable street of handsome three-story houses.

Tony Morgan and Sergeant Bell stopped in front of number 18, the town residence of the late Lord Bellarmine. They tied their horses to the wooden rails that separated the road from the footpath. Tony mounted the polished marble steps, then lifted and dropped the heavy brass knocker. The door, decorated with a black wreath, quivered as if struck by a cannonball.

There was a rattle of chains. The door opened. A diminutive woman in a black silk dress appeared, holding a lamp in her left hand. Her right hand held a wheel-lock dueling pistol that centered on Tony's chest. The woman's face was smooth and unlined, but there were wisps of gray hair showing under her mobcap. Her eyes were a startling blue, and she peered at them nearsightedly.

"Mrs. Creasey. . . ." said Tony.

The woman took a step forward and thrust the lamp in his face. "God love us! Master Anthony . . . milord, that is. . . ." She stepped back and lowered the pistol to her side. "Ah. You don't know how glad I am that you're here. It's been such a terrible time. . . ." She dropped a brief curtsy.

Tony stepped into the black and white tiled foyer. "I didn't expect to be welcomed home at pistol point. . . ."

Mrs. Creasey flushed. "Ah. I'm sorry, milord. It's that I've been in such a fright since. . . ." Her voice broke. "I wouldn't come to the door at all except for the hope that it might be you or Lord Garnett. . . ."

Behind him, Bell brought in the saddlebags.

"I'll see to the horses, sir. If you wants me, I'll be belowstairs." He dropped the bags.

"And clean your boots, Mr. Bell. I don't want great lumps of dirt on my floor," Mrs. Creasey said.

Bell tipped his hat and grinned. "All the comforts of home . . .," he muttered, closing the door behind him.

Tony stood by the ornate, ivory-inlaid desk in his uncle's library. Mrs. Creasey sat in a chair by the fire, her head bent, touching a lace handkerchief to her eyes. She was a handsome woman, and the years sat on her easily. After the death of his mother and Lady Bellarmine in the cholera epidemic, Mrs. Creasey had treated him like a favored son on his frequent visits to his uncle's house.

For twenty years, since his wife's death, she had been Lord Bellarmine's housekeeper and mistress. Tony knew his uncle would have married her despite the social scandal. It was only Mary Creasey's love for his uncle, and her own sense of class distinctions, that made her refuse.

He looked around the room. Nothing had changed. It seemed strange that all of this was now his. The Span-

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ish-leather chairs, the bookcases lining the walls, the world globe that Uncle Frank had often used as a wig-stand. A flood of happy childhood memories came to him, and his eyes blurred.

Tony picked up the decanter from a silver tray on the desk and poured two glasses of Rhenish. He carried one to the fireplace and touched Mrs. Creasey's slim shoulder.

"Mary-Mary. . . ." He hadn't called her that since he was a child of four, huddled in her bed under the eaves, unable to understand where his mother had gone.

She raised her head and smiled. Her eyes were red, and she dabbed at them with her handkerchief. "Anthony. . . ." It eases my soul that you're here, dear boy."

He knelt and pulled her head to his chest. "Ah. Mary. Tell me what happened. . . ." He put the glass in her hand.

Mary Creasey sat up and took a swallow of wine. "It was such a terrible thing." She paused and looked straight at him. "He was a good man. . . . I did . . . I do love him. You knew about us, didn't you?"

Tony rose and went to the desk. He picked up his glass. "I did. He made no secret about his feelings. You could have been Lady Bellarmine. . . ."

She brushed away a tear with the back of her hand. "Never. I was a girl from the Shambles . . . an orange-girl, when I came into this house as a kitchen slut. How could I ever be a 'lady'? The scandal would have finished him at court. As it was, we had a good life together, each in our own way."

"What happened the night he was killed?"

"It started before that. A week or so. Something was troubling him." She smiled. "You know how he was; nothing ruffled his feathers, But there he was, with a scowl on his face, and barely touching his food. He took to sleeping with a pistol next the bed. . . ."

"Had anything unusual happened?"

"Not really. But it was after he had a visitor that I noticed the change in him."

"A visitor?"

"A foreign gentleman. A Count something-or-other. The next day he sent for Lord Garnett. They spent hours shut up in here. I overheard them talking about the old days in Tangier. After that he said we would close the house and go down to the country."

She leaned back in the chair. "That night we were above in bed. All the servants had been sent ahead to the house in Dorset. We were to leave in the morning. The coachman and the groom were sleeping above the stables in the mews, so there was only the two of us in the house.

"I woke to a noise from below. . . ." She bent forward, pressing her hands to her eyes. "I've cursed myself for it a

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thousand times. . . . If only I hadn't. . . ."

"Please go on, Mary. I must know."

"I sat up in the bed, and Frank woke. There was another noise from below. He took the night-candle and the pistol and went downstairs." She stared into the fire. "He was gone but a minute. Then I heard his shout. There was a shot." Her voice softened. "I jumped from the bed and rushed down the stairs. The library door was open, and the candles were lit in the room. The books were pulled from the shelves and the drawers of the desk turned out. The lock on the strongbox was off and the lid open. . . ." She paused and took the glass from the table beside her. "And there he was, poor Frank. Stretched on the floor with his pistol beside him and the blood running from his chest.

"I could see it was a mortal wound. I knelt by him and tried to stop the blood with my gown. . . . He looked up at me and whispered, 'Mary, love. . . .' The life was going out of his eyes. Then he said, 'Tell Tony . . . the peacock . . . the peacock in the map-case. . . .' Then he held my hand . . . and was gone."

Tony stood silent. The tick of the pillar-clock on the mantle echoed in the room.

"Anthony . . . what could he have meant? About a 'peacock' and the 'map-case'?"

"I don't know. Did you tell Lord Garnett what he said?"

"I didn't. I thought it might be some private matter between the two of you."

"I don't know what 'peacock' refers to. . . ." He put his wineglass on the tray. "But I think I know what the 'map-case' means."

He went to the gimballed sphere that stood in the corner. It was a three-foot globe of the world, made by the master artisan Moxon. Tony remembered as a boy, home from Eton for the holidays, how his uncle had used it to help him with his geography lessons.

He turned the knurled brass cap that marked the North Pole, and pulled back. The globe separated at the equator and swung open on hidden hinges. Inside was a polished oak disk with rows of round, vertical pigeonholes that had once held maps and charts. The holes were empty. In the center of the disk rested a square black box the size of a pistol case.

Tony picked it up. He was startled by its weight and almost dropped it. The black surface was smooth and felt cold to the touch. On top was a sharply engraved figure of a peacock with nine tail feathers, each set with what appeared to be a ruby. He turned the box, looking for a latch or hinges. There were none.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked Mary.

"I've never seen it before this minute. But it must be important if. . . . Perhaps that's what Lord Garnett was looking for. He and his daughter, Lady

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Elicia, were here the day after the murder. They searched the room from top to bottom. Lord Garnett was particular in wanting to know was anything gone. I told him nothing at all, as far as I could tell, not even a bit of silver. Poor Frank must have come on them before they. . . ."

There was a knock at the door. Mary Creasey rose and straightened her dress, then moved quickly to the desk and put her glass on the tray.

"Come. . . ." Tony said.

Bell entered the room. He was freshly shaved and wearing the dove-gray and yellow livery of the Bellarmines. He held a silver salver in one white-gloved hand. "Lord Garnett's man was here, milord. A message for you."

"Didn't take you long to get out of the king's coat, did it, Bell?" Tony took the letter.

"No, sir. Like being cured of the scrofula, getting out of them clothes."

There was a rustle behind him. Mary Creasey came forward carrying the tray with its glasses. "Will there be anything else, milord?"

"No thank you, Mrs. Creasey."

She bobbed a brief curtsy and went out closing the door.

Tony took the letter. "See what you make of this, Bell. If it's a box, I can't see any way to open it. Of course, judging by the weight, it might be solid. But I don't think even a block of gold would be that heavy."

Bell took the box and stepped back. Light flickered from the jeweled feathers of the peacock's tail. "Where did you get this, sir?"

Tony explained how he had found it. "I can't imagine what it is, or what it's for." He went to the desk and sat down to read Garnett's message.

Sergeant Bell took the box to the hearth and tilted it toward the light.

Tony opened Garnett's message and read it. "Ah. Good news. Garnett's back from Holland just this day. Wants me to call round in the morning."

Bell stepped back. "By God! It's come open, sir!"

"How did you do it?" Tony asked.

"Couldn't say, sir. I was just fiddlin' with them jewels on that bird, and up it popped." He put the box on the desk.

Tony pulled the lamp close and looked at the object in the box. It was a dark red disk of highly polished stone. The surface was smooth, except where it was deeply incised with a circle. The circle was crossed by a series of lines, forming a symmetrical, enneadic symbol.

"Looks like some odd kind of star," Tony said. Three blunt silver pins protruded from the circumference of the circle. They were connected by lines that formed an equilateral triangle within the starlike pattern. Tony reached for the disk and lifted it from the case.

"Be careful, sir!" Bell cried.

The object in his hand was not a

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disk; it was a half-sphere. He felt the weight of it in his hand. It was smooth and cold. A shock ran up his arm. Bell's voice faded. He could see the sergeant's mouth move, but he heard no sounds.

The room filled with a blue, flickering light. As if in a dream, he saw his right hand hover over the star. Without volition, his finger touched the silver pin at the top of the figure. A chord sounded within him, a great bass chord that seemed to emanate from his very bones. A charge of lightning went through his body.

Lights. Bright, whirling lights. He felt himself falling, falling through the lights and into darkness. Cold pierced to his bones, and he cried out in pain. No sense of direction. A vertiginous rush. Bile rose in his throat, and he choked it back. Spectral shapes flickered past. The blackness moved. He felt a pull, a great invisible riptide sweeping him into abysmal blackness. He tried to move his limbs, to fight against the swallowing dark. No effect. He was without control, disconnected from his body.

Lights again, rushing past, whipped into a spiral. They flared, the intensity searing his brain, then faded to pinpoints. The bass chord sounded. The sound stretched, like a voice speaking in some incomprehensible tongue. Sound and light were sucked into the black vortex.

"Sir!"

His vision cleared. A faint blue light suffused the room. Sensation came back to his limbs, and he looked up.

"Sir! Are you all right?"

"Yes, I am, Bell." He had a sense of alertness, a heightened perception of all that was in the room. Colors had a peculiar vibrancy. Details stood out with intense clarity. It was as if he somehow stood outside himself, watching himself watching.

"Just a momentary seizure. . . . I'm fine now. . . ." He closed the lid of the box. "Perhaps I'd better put this away for now." He got up and took the box to the Moxon globe and closed the hemispheres.

There was a knock on the door. It opened, and Mrs. Creasey stepped in and shut it behind her.

"There's a gentleman to see you, milord . . . a Count Desavvy." She moved quickly across the room. "It's him . . . ," she whispered. "The man who came to see your uncle just before he died."

The comte di Savoia leaned back in the leather chair. He took the glass of brandy from the tray offered by Bell and held it up to the light.

"That will be all, Bell," Tony said.

Bell glanced at his master and left the room.

"You are very kind to receive me, Lord Bellarmine," the man said. He was a tall man, dressed in black vel-

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velvet. His face was pale, and he wore a pointed beard and mustaches in the French fashion. His short traveling-wig was elaborately curled.

The comte stretched his long legs toward the fire and swirled the brandy in his glass. "Ah. Good French brandy . . . not much left in England. Let us hope that this unfortunate war is soon over. . . ."

Tony looked at the man closely. "Yes. Of course," he said in a flat voice. He raised his own glass to his lips.

The comte looked at him steadily. "You must excuse my intrusion, milord. I was passing, and it occurred to me to stop in, to convey my condolences to you on your loss."

"Very kind of you. You were acquainted with my uncle?"

The man smiled, showing even, white teeth. "Indeed. From many years ago in Tangier."

Tony studied the comte. The man did not seem old enough to have known Uncle Frank during the Barbary campaign.

"I called on him just before his death," the man said. He got up and stood with his back to the fire. "I owed him a debt. . . . This is my first visit to your lovely country. I've lived in Spain for many years. An exile. . . . The situation in my own poor country is not. . . ." He stopped. "I will not burden you with the troubles of my people. Enough to say that when I came to England, I thought immediately of my old friend Lord Bellarmine. Knowing his fondness for good wine, I could think of nothing better than to bring him some of the finest Malaga . . . from my own vineyards, if I may say so modestly. You can imagine my shock. . . ."

"Very kind of you. I'm sure my uncle would have appreciated it."

The comte strolled around the room. He rested one hand on the back of a chair and looked up at the shelves of books. "You English have such a sense of . . . comfort, should I say? Will you be staying on here?"

Tony shifted in his chair. "Ah. I haven't decided yet. The house was being shut for the season. My uncle was going down to Dorset. Perhaps I'll follow his plan."

The comte di Savoia paused by the Moxon globe and gave it a spin. "I think that would be wise. A time away from the scene of this senseless tragedy." He finished his brandy and glanced at the pillar-clock. "I must be off. When my ship arrives from Spain, it would please me if you would accept my gift in memory of your uncle."

Tony stood up. "An honor, sir."

Tony put down his week-old copy of *The Flying Observer* as Mrs. Creasey came into the library. "You'll ruin your eyes, reading in this light." She pulled the heavy drapes full open. Bright sunlight streamed through the beveled glass panes of the Palladian windows. "Will you have your break-

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fast in here, milord?"

"I think not, Mrs. Creasey." The thought of the usual English breakfast of hot ale with bits of toasted bread in it made his stomach queasy.

"You must eat, milord," Mrs. Creasey said in a voice that allowed no contradiction.

"Well. Perhaps a cup of chocolate, then . . . with egg and Jamaican sugar in it . . . and ask Bell to come, if you will."

Tony looked up as Bell approached the desk. "Yes, milord?"

"I'm off to Lord Garnett's this morning. Have my horse brought around in an hour."

"Yes, sir. If I might suggest, sir. . . ."

"What is it?"

"Lord Garnett. If you were to show that box to him, sir. Perhaps, as Lord Bellarmine's friend, he'd know something about it."

"Had the same thought myself, Bell. I certainly will take it."

"One more matter, milord."

"Yes. . . ."

"If you won't be needing me this morning, I'd like to visit me brother. I've an idea he might be of help in the matter of your uncle's murder."

"Your brother? How could he possibly. . . ."

Bell looked down at the floor. "You see, sir. If whoever killed Lord Bellarmine was a common footpad, he'd be known." He hesitated. "It's like a guild, you see. Them as does that kind of work, the word gets around."

"And just where does your estimable brother fit into the picture?"

Bell smiled. "He's in the way of the trade, as it were. Buying and selling. . . ."

"You mean he's a receiver of stolen goods. . . ."

Bell looked offended. "I wouldn't say that, sir. More like if something was to fall off the back of a wagon, he'd find a home for it."

Tony laughed. "An excellent idea, Bell. See what you can find out." He lowered his voice. "It might help to put out a reward of a hundred guineas."

"We'll find the villain, sir. I'll break him like a dry stick, myself."

Tony turned right, riding away from the noise and jostling of King Street and The Haymarket, into the quiet, elm-shaded Pall Mall. The morning sky was clear, and the sun through the trees dappled the paved path.

At Garnett House, blue-and-white liveried gatekeepers touched their caps in recognition. The three-story house of Portland stone showed the influence of Inigo Jones in its arched and pillared windows and graceful portico.

Tony dismounted in the forecourt and handed his reins to a waiting groom. From his saddlebag he took the chamois pouch that held the peacock box, and went up the white marble staircase. Browne, Lord Garnett's

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majordomo, met him at the door. "You're expected in the drawing room, milord."

The drawing room was bright with sun. Through the open windows, Tony could see the rolling green of St. James's Park. Lady Elicia put down her sewing frame and rose from her window seat. "Anthony. . . . How good to see you again. Such awful news about your uncle. I'm very sorry. How is Mrs. Creasey taking it? I called round to see her . . . but there was no answer at the door."

"As well as can be expected." Tony was amazed that a well-bred English lady would call to offer condolences to the presumed mistress of a murdered nobleman

She came toward him. She wore a full-skirted gray silk dress with lace gussets. A black belt embroidered with seed pearls emphasized her narrow waist, and her dark hair was elaborately coiffed but unpowdered.

Tony bent to kiss her proffered hand. She was taller than he remembered. But that had been more than two years ago. Then she had seemed a silly girl, interested only in horses and given to playing romantic airs on the virginal.

"Elicia, my dear. . . ." He looked into her dark eyes. "You . . . have . . . ah. . . ." he stammered.

"Changed? We do grow up, you know. But how kind of you to notice. I hadn't thought you were aware of my existence. . . ." She laughed. "Do sit. Father will be down directly."

Tony flushed and sat on a spindly chair. He balanced the chamois bag on his knees and stared out the window. "Ah. . . . Lovely day, isn't it?"

"It is." Lady Elicia watched him with a faint smile on her lips. "And how were things in Ireland when you left?"

He looked at her as if he'd never heard the word before. "Ireland. Ah. Ireland. Well . . . it's over. We have peace since Sarsfield signed the treaty at Limerick. Though with the Irish, one never knows how long that will last."

"And how did you find the Irish ladies? I've hard they're uncommonly beautiful . . . and willful."

Tony shifted the bag from one knee to the other. "Didn't have much time to observe the ladies. But they are a bit . . . different from English ladies. Take a fence like a cavalry trooper, and dead shots with a pistol, many of them. I saw the townswomen of Limerick rout a company of grenadiers by flinging paving stones. . . . Something in the Irish blood, I suppose."

"How uncivilized of them! Imagine . . . paving stones and pistols! I'm sure no decent Englishwoman would attack a man in uniform. At least not with a view to bodily harm. . . ."

Tony's face reddened. He looked at her, profiled against the window's light. He was puzzled. Two years ago, Elicia had been a moon-eyed child

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who looked at him as if he were some demigod. Now he felt like a tongue-tied schoolboy in the presence of the headmaster's wife.

"Tony, my boy!" A voice boomed from the doorway. With a sense of relief, Tony stood, holding the heavy bag in one hand.

Arthur Mayland, fourth Lord Garnett, came into the room. He was a tall man and carried himself with erect grace. His Brussels lace cravat was fixed with a diamond stickpin, and a black velvet coat showed off his still youthful figure.

"How good it is to see you looking fit." He gave Tony a fatherly embrace. "I'm only sorry that you had to come home to such a tragedy. . . ."

"It was a great shock, but I've hopes that we'll find the man who did it," Tony said.

"Yes. I've asked friends of mine to look into the matter as well. If the king hadn't sent me off. . . ."

Lady Elicia rose. "If you will excuse me, gentlemen. . . ."

"Must you go?"

"Yes, Father. I've preparations to make for this evening."

"Very good. Have Browne decant a bottle of Haut Brion for us." Her father watched her leave. He turned to Tony. "Last one in the nest. Must marry her off soon, before she makes trouble. Young bucks hanging about . . . two of them came almost to sword's point over her. But she ran them off; couldn't stand either of them. Takes after her mother, that one does."

The two men sat at the polished refectory table under the windows. Tony explained to Lord Garnett what Mrs. Creasey had said, and how he found the box. He pulled it from the bag and slid it toward Lord Garnett.

"Ah. I'm much relieved . . .," Garnett said. "I feared the box had been taken."

"What is it? Is it valuable?"

Garnett leaned back in his chair. "Valuable? Yes." He touched the edge of the box with a long finger. "You cannot know what this box means. It is probable that the fate of humanity . . . our very survival, depends on it. This contains what some call the 'Egg of the Peacock'"

"It didn't much resemble an egg. Bell fiddled the thing open. . . ."

Garnett smiled. "Ah. Yes. The good Sergeant Bell." He turned the box toward him. "There is a cipher to open it."

He pointed to the engraved figure of the peacock. "The feathers represent the numbers from 1 to 9. If one presses these jewels in the order 1, 4, 2, 8, 5, 7. . . ."

The box came open, revealing the red disk. "Very interesting numbers, these. . . ." He looked at Tony. "The great Claudius Ptolemaeus spent his life studying these numbers and how they relate to the symbol you see. If you multiply 142857 by 2, you get 285714; by 3, 428571 . . . and so on,

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in sequence. The numbers 3, 6, and 9 do not appear; they are represented by the superimposed equilateral triangle — which, as you see, if you begin with 'do' at the top, makes the symbol equal to the musical scale, with the 3 and 6 representing the missing semitones between mi and fa, and. . . ." He paused.

Tony shook his head. His knowledge of mathematics did not extend beyond the simple geometry of ballistics for a twelve-pound field gun. "Very interesting, sir. But I don't see. . . ."

Garnett looked at him intently. "No, of course. Perhaps I should tell you how your uncle came into possession of this box."

Lord Garnett took a clay pipe from the rack on the table. He lit a taper from the smoking-candle and sucked noisily. "I know how boring it is for you young men to hear old soldiers talk about *their* wars when yours are so immediate and much more interesting. But I must go back in time." He blew a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling.

"Your father, your uncle, and I were all friends at Cambridge. We were young and hot-blooded then, and, except for your Uncle Frank, not much as scholars. We were given to the usual student vices of gambling, drink, and women.

"There was a scandal, involving a prebendary's daughter. . . ." He smiled at the memory. "We were sent down in disgrace.

"Needless to say, our families were not pleased. This was in '62. The Barbary pirates were raiding English ships in the Mediterranean, Algerine corsairs came north as far as the mouth of the Thames, and even for a while held the Isle of Lundy.

"The earl of Peterborough was directed to raise five hundred horse and two thousand foot to secure the port of Tangier. The plan was to build a mole to shelter our warships, which could then sweep the pirates from the seas and make trading safe. We decided to join him. Our families were delighted, believing that there was nothing like a bit of war to put sense into a young man's head.

"At that time, Abd Allah al-Ghailan, whom we called 'Gayland,' was in revolt against the sultan of Morocco. The earl of Sandwich was holding the port with a few sailors and marines. When our force landed, Gayland had the town surrounded on three sides with seventeen thousand of his Berbers.

"Fortunately for us, the Berbers were ill-armed. Old matchlock *jezails,* captured muskets, sabers, and swords. . . . It was only our artillery and the navy guns that kept them off. We were young and filled with notions of glory, the three of us. But there were no heroic pitched battles, only vicious skirmishes and sorties with no quarter given. When we weren't fight-

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ing, life under siege was exceedingly dull.

"It was your father who initiated the plan, but Frank and I were both eager for it. As you know, your uncle had a facility for languages. While the rest of us were playing cards, he studied Arabic. He spent hours in the souk, haggling with merchants until he could speak like a native.

"Now, at that time Gayland had a bagnio . . . a prisoner camp in the city of Meknes. Two hundred Europeans were kept there. The conditions were appalling, and it was known that Gayland would select prisoners at random and entertain himself by torturing them. A number of attempts had been made to ransom them, but Gayland either refused or the government thought his price too high.

"The only solution seemed to be a raid-in-force, a strike into the heart of enemy country by well-mounted troops. But that was not possible without knowing the defenses of Meknes and the exact location of the bagnio. Your father had the idea that the three of us should make a reconnaissance, disguised as Berbers. We worked out the plan and presented it to the staff. The idea was not met with enthusiasm. The debate went on for two months. There were senior officers who thought that 'getting one's self up in bed sheets and sneaking into an enemy stronghold' was somehow ungentlemanly. But your father pushed our case strongly. In the end it was the fact that your uncle was fluent in Arabic that made them agree to let us go.

"We rode out on a moonless night, cloaked as Berbers. It was seventy-five miles across rough country to Meknes. We traveled at night and hid by day. Twice we were challenged by Gayland's men and had to fight our way clear. It was four days of hard riding to Meknes. With Frank's skill in the language, we were able to penetrate the city."

Lord Garnett paused and looked out the window. "We were too late . . . the months of delay by the staff. . . . Three days before our arrival, the prisoners had been marched off to some unknown destination in the Atlas Mountains.

"There was nothing to do but return. We could not go back the way we came, for the enemy behind us was alerted. We took a more circuitous route. It was near a small village called Allal-Tazi that it happened.

"We were desperate for water and took the chance of riding out before dark. Frank was in a strange humor and insisted on leading. Your father and I brought up the rear. Frank moved off at a fast pace, as if he knew where he was going. We had ridden only half an hour, when Frank stopped at the crest of a hill. We rode up behind him and saw a curious sight. Below us were half a dozen Moors surrounding a ragged old man in a black turban and a white robe. They had the

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old fellow pegged out on his back. As we watched, one of the Moors stuffed a fused bag of powder into the man's mouth and lashed his jaw shut with a leather thong. The other men laughed and joked. One of them was about to fire the fuse, when Frank spurred his horse forward and shouted at them in Arabic.

"Before we knew it, Frank was among them, chattering and throwing his arms about. We rode after him.

"One of the Moors grabbed Frank by the leg and pulled him from his mount. He had a knife in his hand. I fired at the gallop. It was a lucky shot, and the man dropped. The other men ran for their horses and fled. Frank had the bag out of the old beggar's mouth, and the two of them were jabbering away. We cut him loose and mounted him on the dead man's horse. We were off at a gallop for fear the men would come back with reinforcements.

"It was fortunate we had the old man with us, for we were soon lost. For the next four days, he took us through the wilderness, finding water and leading us to places where we could lay up in the day. While we rested, he would disappear, to return at dusk with a sack of grain or a few loaves of flat, hard bread.

"From Frank, we got the old man's story. He was from Kurdistan, a sheikh of the Yezidi, one of the ***kabana*** . . . a Spiritual leader, as it were. In those days the Turkish Musselmen were slaughtering the Yezidi . . . they believed them heretics, worshipers of shaitan. The sheikh and five of his ***murida,*** or students, were forced to flee. They drifted from country to country, hoping to find a place to establish themselves in peace and guard their heritage. But one by one they were killed off, until the old man was alone."

Tony leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. "What did that have to do with this?" He pointed at the box.

"Ah. That we didn't know until later. We were lost by then, totally dependent on the old man. Your father and I were in doubt that the old fellow knew where we were, that he could guide us back to Tangier. But Frank never lost faith in the man. He was convinced that the old man had spoken to him in his mind, that he had led us to the spot where we rescued him. Said the old boy knew where he was by 'visions' . . . a statement that did not give me a great deal of reassurance.

"That day the sheikh led us into a ravine. The sun was coming over the mountains, and it was nearly light. Looking about, I could see that we were in a cul-de-sac. Halfway up the cliff was the black mouth of a cave. For a moment I had the notion that we'd been led into a trap. . . . There was nothing I could put a name to . . . just a profound unease. The old man

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had a word with Frank, then climbed alone up to the cave. Frank stared after him, standing stiff, as if in a trance. I glanced at your father. Without speaking, we checked the priming on our pistols.

"The old man came down the mountain carrying a leather pouch. When he reached us, he walked straight past Frank. He came directly to me and put the bag at my feet, and said, *'Baraka.'* . . . Then he stepped forward and held his hands before my eyes. I was stunned, as if I had been struck by lightning. I seemed to be moving through blackness and light, frightened, yet at the same time pervaded by a sense of peace and well-being. It was like a dream, a dream in which I was awake, more alert than I'd ever been in my life. I could not move, yet I was out of my body, watching the scene from a distance. Frank stood, facing the cave, straight as a pillar. I saw my own immobile form, sitting on a rock, and the old sheikh moving to place his hands before your father's eyes.

"The next day, at dawn, we were in Tangier."

After our return to the city, Frank found a place for the old man in the souk. He was a powerful old man, lean and hard as a twenty-year-old. From his description of certain events, we deduced that he was incredibly old, perhaps more than a hundred.

"We were there for another ten months, and we sat with the old man nearly every night, as our duties allowed, listening to his tales and performing . . . certain exercises . . . that he gave us.

"At first Frank acted as interpreter. But the old man insisted that he teach him English. He was quick and within a few months had mastered the language. It was amusing to hear him, this small brown man, his voice rather high-pitched, speaking in the accents of an Eton schoolboy.

"In time, a few others joined us. When we had seven of us, we formed a *halka,* a lodge. We were initiated as *murida* in the Order of Malak Taus, the Peacock Angel."

Tony looked at him. "You joined this . . . religious sect?"

Lord Garnett leaned back and smiled. "Strange, isn't it? The king's soldiers pledging themselves to a penniless little fakir. When we left Tangier, we smuggled the sheikh aboard a transport and brought him back to England. But it wasn't a religious sect. You see, what the old man had brought with him from that cave was this very box.

"To understand, you must know about the War of the Peacock Angels. I can tell you the bare details, and perhaps later, if the matter interests you. . . ."

He touched the symbol on the top of the box. "The Peacock is an ancient symbol among the Yezidi. It is

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the 'name of the number of a name,' a cipher from the *abjad,* the Arabic cabala. With time, the real meaning of the Peacock was lost as the symbol passed into the common culture. But there was a small brotherhood, an order, that understood the true meaning of the Peacock. This order has existed for more than a thousand years.

"Gradually the knowledge and teachings of the inner circle of the order separated from what one might call the 'outer circle.' The rituals remained, but the knowledge of the 'War of the Peacock Angels' and the custody of their trust remained to a few.

"The story began in the time of Alexander the Great. The hordes of Alexander and Darius Codomannus raged through Persia. Darius and Alexander met at a great battle on the river Granicus, and here Darius suffered the first of his defeats by the Macedonian boy-king.

"At the point on the river where the enemies clashed lived a group of holy men, devoted to meditation and the recording of the movements of celestial bodies. A number of monks were killed. Their crops were burned and their flocks devoured by the soldiers of both sides.

"To escape the conflict, the monks moved to the north, to what were called 'The Mountains of the Cold Wind.' There they found a small, fertile valley, difficult of access. They settled in, built a monastery, and continued their contemplative life.

"One night the monk on duty in the observatory saw a bright light in the sky. It came from the east, trailing fire. As the monk watched, the light moved erratically, then hovered over the valley. There was an explosive sound in the air that shook the candles. The fiery object dropped into the valley with such force that the walls of the monastery were cracked.

"In the morning the monks crept out. The valley was ripped and burned for half a mile, and littered with bits and pieces of the object that had fallen from the sky.

"When at last they found the courage to examine the object, the monks discovered that it was a kind of ship, a sky-ship made of metal. The ship was large, a hundred times bigger than a galley, and, as they discovered, it had many cabins. In one of these cabins, they found the Angels. A Red Angel, a Black Angel, and a Green Angel. They were called thus not because of the color of their skin, but because of the distinctive clothes they wore. They were named 'Angels' because they came from the sky and because when they were first found, their heads were surrounded by a golden, glowing nimbus, more beautiful than the finest Venetian glass.

"Except for their clothes, they were much like other men. The Red and Black Angels were male . . . the Green Angel was female. Both the Red and Black Angels were injured,

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the Black Angel severely.

"Now, the Green Angel had a magic box, a box that spoke to the monks in their own language. With her guidance the injured Angels were taken to the monastery. With the help of the monks, the Green Angel moved many artifacts from the ship, storing them in a nearby cave. The Red Angel soon recovered, and, with the monks, he and the Green Angel scoured every inch of the valley . . . looking for the 'Egg of the Peacock.' There was great joy when the Green Angel found the first half of the Egg. By itself, even half of the Egg had great power. The search went on for the other half. The story is that when both halves of the Egg were put together, a message could be sent to the stars . . . that in time, other Angels would hear the message and come to find the lost ones.

"The Black Angel did not recover from his wounds. At last the Green Angel put him in a kind of glass box, several of which had been recovered from the ship. She told the monks that the Black Angel would sleep there until the other Angels came to find them. The search went on for the other half of the Egg, until one day it was found in the scattered wreckage by the Red Angel. The Green Angel was overjoyed. She wanted to put the halves together and send the message to the stars. The Red Angel refused. He wanted to use the Egg to give him dominion over the world.

"The debate between the two Angels went on for days. Each refused to surrender his half to the other. Then one night the Red Angel destroyed the glass box in which the Black Angel rested. The Black Angel was killed. The two Angels, the Red and the Green, fought a duel with swords of fire. The battle raged through the valley. In the heat of their fire-swords, earth turned to glass and the rocks melted. Both were wounded, but the Red Angel's sword failed and he was driven off, taking with him half of the Egg. Some of the monks, seduced by his promises of worldly power, went with him.

"The Green Angel was badly hurt, and, without the other half of the Egg, she could send no message. At last, when she was weak and near death, she had the monks who remained loyal to her place her in one of the glass boxes. She pledged them to search for the other half of the Egg and to be the guardians of the half she entrusted to them. They were given the secret cipher and told how to send the message to her people.

"The glass box with the sleeping Green Angel was placed in the cave. For many years, parties of monks went out to search the world for the missing half of the Egg, but always returned empty-handed. Then one year there was a terrible earthquake. The valley was blocked by a fall of rock, and the river that ran through it was dammed. The water rose, covering the monastery and the cave.

"It is said that the Green Angel

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still sleeps beneath the water. The monks moved on, but search for the Peacock's Egg continues."

There was a long silence. At last Tony spoke. "A strange story. A ship from the sky . . . Angels. . . . Do you believe it, sir?"

"Believe? I *know.*" He touched the box. "This box was carved from the metal of that ship. There is no artisan on earth who can change its form." He took the diamond stickpin from his cravat and scraped it over the surface of the box. "You see, not even a diamond will mark it."

"How was it made, then?"

"It was cut from a piece of the ship by the monks, using a fire-knife given them by the Green Angel . . . a small version of the Angels' flaming swords."

Tony helped himself to a pipe from the rack and lit up. "Sounds like magic. . . ."

"Not at all, my boy. You see those three silver pegs? They fit into holes on the other half of the Egg. The Egg is a device, a machine of sorts. Made by craftsmen whose skills are far beyond ours. Not magic, but a machine, in the sense that a clock is a machine. That we, like savages seeing a clockwork canary in a golden cage, might think it 'magic' reflects our ignorance of its mechanism."

"I see. But I had a very strange sensation when I touched it," Tony said.

"Yes. That's a gift. Not given to everyone. Your uncle was one of the few. After the old sheikh's death, he became *ruban* of our order; that is, he had the ability to enter a trance state, to receive what he called 'visions' from the Egg. I cannot tell you what these visions were, but some of them concerned you. That is why the Egg was entrusted to your custody."

"Yes. I suppose I. . . ."

Lord Garnett held up his hand. "There is a meeting of the *balka* tonight. I would like you to come and meet the others, and of course, to bring the box with you."

"Certainly, sir. I should be honored."

"Good. I shall arrange to have you escorted there."

The door opened, and Browne entered with a decanter of Haut Brion. Shall I pour, sir?"

Lord Garnett nodded. When the man was gone, he held his glass up to the light. "How fortunate we are that the French don't make war as well as they make wine."

Tony laughed and took a sip from his glass. "Speaking of wine, sir. A comte di Savoia called to offer condolences. Said he was an old friend of Uncle Frank's in Tangier. Wants to leave off some Malaga as a gift. . . ."

"The comte. Yes. Your uncle and I had a discussion about him. Whatever he said to you, he was not known to either of us in Tangier. The story he gave your uncle was quite differ-

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ent. I've connections . . . at Whitehall looking into his background. With the war, the king has a certain interest in the comings and goings of foreigners. Perhaps we shall soon have some answers about the comte di Savoia."

The door opened and Browne entered. His face was red and his clubbed wig askew. "Your pardon, milord. . . ."

"There's a man at the door. Sent by Mr. Bell with a message for Lord Bellarmine."

"Well, what is it, man?"

"Mr. Bell requests that His Lordship return at once. There's been a shooting at Bellarmine House. . . ."

Sergeant Thomas Bell turned into Milford Lane. Two large glasses of gin and the long walk from his brother's in the midday heat brought sweat to his forehead. "Shouldn't have had that last one," he said as he stumbled against a loose paving stone. He grabbed Skatty's shoulder for support.

The little gap-toothed pimp looked up at him. "Easy does it, lad. Yer' brother was pouring the real stuff. Not 'alf water like usual."

"Think you can find out who did old Bellarmine in?" Bell asked.

"I might, Tommy." He jingled the coins in his pocket. "I'll talk to the lads in the mews, the coachmen and stable lads. Could be they've seen somebody hanging about."

"Worth a try, it is," Bell said. A hundred yards ahead, a black cabriolet was stopped in front of number 18. Two wooden crates were strapped to its rear.

A muffled explosion sounded from the house. The door opened, and a man ran down the lane toward the Thames. A black-caped figure jumped from the cabriolet and rushed up the stairs and into the house.

"Come on, Skatty. . . ." Bell drew his sword and ran toward the Bellarmine residence.

The foyer reeked of burned powder. Mrs. Creasey stood in the middle of the library, the wheel-lock pistol in her hand. At her feet was the body of a man, shot through the chest by a musket ball. The man in black moved toward Mrs. Creasy, who stared at the body on the floor.

Bell grabbed the man's shoulder and spun him about. The point of his sword touched the man's throat. The comte di Savoia stepped back and dropped his hand to his sword.

"You . . . what are you doing here?" Bell asked. He glanced at Mrs. Creasey. "Are you all right, missus?"

The comte gave him a hard look. "You're Lord Bellarmine's man, are you not?"

Bell ignored the question. "What's going on here?"

Mary Creasey looked away from the dead man. Her face was white. "Mr. Bell! Thank God! I came home,

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and there were two men in the house. This one came after me." She pointed to the man on the floor. "I got the pistol. Then. . . ."

"And what are you doing here? What's your business?" he asked the comte.

The comte pushed Bell's blade with the side of his hand. "I am not accustomed to explaining myself to servants; however, you have the advantage of me. I stopped to deliver a gift to your master. I heard the shot and saw a man run out of the house. I came in to investigate. . . ."

"I see. If you'll leave now, I'll see to Mrs. Creasey." Bell's voice was flat.

The comte stepped toward the door. "Under the circumstances, I will overlook your rudeness. If you were my servant, I'd have a hot poker run through your tongue." He brushed past Skatty, who stood speechless in the doorway. "I'll have my man put the cases in the foyer. You will so inform your master."

"Christ Jesus! What's this?" Skatty came forward and knelt by the corpse.

Bell pried the pistol from Mrs. Creasey's hand and led her to a chair.

"I knows this 'un, Tommy. Name of Sutton . . . a scurvy knave, he is. . . . ."

"Never mind now, Skatty. Find a hack and get to Garnett House. Tell Lord Bellarmine to come as quick as he can."

Mrs. Creasey sat propped against the lace-edged pillows on the four-poster bed. The french doors to the balcony were open, framing a huge oak tree that filtered green light into the bedroom. Bell handed her a glass of brandy. The strings of her cap hung limp against her pale cheeks. She took the glass with a steady hand and looked at them. Tony sat on her right, hunched forward, his hands on his knees.

"He's dead, isn't he . . . that man?" she said.

Bell patted her shoulder. "Yes. He's been taken away. There's nought to fear."

She sat up and took a swallow of brandy. "Fear? You don't understand, do you? You men with your wars and duels and such . . . games they are to you. God never gave me the grace of giving life. . . . Now I've taken one. And I'm glad. I pray that he was the sewer scum that killed my Frank."

There was a long silence. Then Tony spoke. "How did it happen, Mary?"

Mrs. Creasey drained her glass and leaned back. "After you and Mr. Bell was gone, I went off to see my sister, in Duck Lane. It was after midday I got back. I came through the mews and went direct to the kitchen. I heard footsteps above, and I thought you had returned. I went up to ask if anything was wanted. These two men was in the drawing room. One of them came after me. I ran into the library and got the pistol from the

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desk. . . . As I turned, he was on me. . . . I shot him. The other man ran out the front door. Next I knew, there was Mr. Bell and that count standing there."

"Skatty knows the man what was shot," Bell said.

Tony turned in his chair. "Well, Skatty, who is he?"

Skatty stepped forward and removed his hat. "One of the Sutton brothers, milord. From the Liberty . . . ," he said, referring to the labyrinthine slum of Whitefriars, which was a refuge for thieves, murderers, and highwaymen. "Hires out, he does. All brawn and no brain. A shilling to break a man's head. Legs and arms, two-for-sixpence."

"Sutton and whoever was with him must have thought the house empty," Bell said.

"Can you find out who Sutton was working for?"

Skatty smiled. "Possible, milord. A sovereign or two in the right places might do wonders."

Bell turned to him. "Then get on with it, Skatty. And I want you to put some, ah . . . friends to watch this house, front and back. You understand?"

Half an hour later, Tony sat at the desk in the library. Sergeant Bell came into the room. "She's resting now, sir. I gave her a bit of mithridate to help her sleep." He nodded at the silver-chased Weeder pistol on the desk. "Good shot that was; got the bugger dead center."

"I should say. Let's hope we don't have any more shooting matches in the house." Tony put the pistol in a drawer. "They must have come back looking for the box."

"We'll put holes in the lot of them if they try again. Skatty's got people in the streets, front and back."

"Seems like we're in a war, doesn't it, Bell?"

"We've had some practice, haven't we, sir? Now, if you don't need me, I'm off with Skatty to see what we can find out about that Sutton lout. Also might find out something about this here count . . . sneaky foreign bugger. Seems queer he was here just as the house was raided."

"Good, Bell. Carry on, then. I'll be out myself this evening. I've an appointment with Garnett."

It was nine o'clock when Lord Garnett's carriage arrived. The evening was cool, and Tony wore a light traveling cloak and a quillon-hilted sword. A brace of pistols were tucked into his crimson officer's sash.

At the bottom of the stairs, a footman in the Garnett livery held the carriage door open. Tony noted that the man was armed with a half-pike. He tucked the Peacock box in its chamois bag under his arm and got into the carriage.

"Good evening, milord Bellarmine. . . ."

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Tony stared into the interior of the coach. A single candle in a glass cage swung from the roof. A cloaked woman sat in the corner, her hood drawn up over her head.

"Elicia. . . ."

She laughed. "Of course, my dear Tony. Father sent me to escort you."

He eased himself into the seat next to her. "Are you. . . . Do you belong to. . . ."

"The order? Yes, of course. The Fagraia, 'The Poor Little Ones,' as the sisterhood is called."

A faint scent of lavender came to him. He leaned back and held the bag on his lap. The carriage made a sharp right turn. A hard object on the seat betwen them pressed into his leg. "Where are we going?" he asked.

She turned toward him. "To a house in the country."

"Who will be there? Besides your father?"

"That I cannot say." She hesitated. "There are . . . certain rules . . . that you must understand. You must promise that you will tell no one what you see tonight."

"Certainly."

"Also . . . the people you meet. Some of them you may know by name or reputation. If you meet any of them again, you must act as if he were a stranger."

"I understand." Again he felt the uncomfortable pressure against his leg. He dropped his hand to shift it.

Lady Elicia's cool fingers touched his. "Ah. My reticule." She extracted a beaded bag from between them. The carriage jolted, and the bag cracked against his knee.

"My God! What *do* you have in that bag?"

Elicia stifled a laugh with a gloved hand, then opened the bag. "It's not that I don't trust your honor, sir. . . ." She reached in and withdrew a small double-barreled Italian pistol. Tony looked at it in astonishment.

"My father assures me that we may be in some danger, after the attacks on your house." She pressed a latch on the pistol. Double triggers dropped into place. "As Mrs. Creasey would tell you, Celtic women are not the only ones who can shoot."

"I didn't mean. . . ."

Elicia patted his knee with a gloved hand. "Of course you didn't, my dear."

She slipped the pistol back into her bag and shifted it to the other side. Her left leg pressed against his thigh. He sat still, not wanting to offend her by moving.

They drove west, rattling over the potholes of Piccadilly. Through the lowered blinds, Tony could see the lighted windows of Clarendon House. The country opened out, past scattered farms and coaching inns, along the Kensington Road. They turned left into a wooded lane.

"Where are we?" he asked. He had been looking more at Lady Elicia than at the scenery.

"Chelsea."

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Chelsea, an isolated area of farms, fields, and scattered manor houses. They turned into a wide driveway. Ahead were the lighted windows of a squat, two-story building with crenellated towers rising black against the full-moon sky. The carriage crunched over the cockleshell drive, and the coachman pulled the horses to a stop.

Elicia picked up her bag. "We're here. . . ."

Tony followed her to a small room off the wood-paneled entrance hall. "I have some arrangements to make. Father will see you in there." She left him at the door.

As Tony entered the room, Lord Garnett closed the ledger in which he had been writing. He wore a long white wool cloak over his ordinary clothes. A woven band of black and green silk hung about his neck. "Tony. . . . Good of you to come. You brought the box, I see."

"I did, sir." He put the bag on the table.

"I'll see that it's returned to your care after the meeting." He rose. "I'll take you to meet the others. I presume Elicia warned you to be discreet about anyone you may see here?"

"She did."

"Good. One more thing. Here there are no distinctions of rank or class. What a man *does* is not what he *is*. Those wearing robes are *murida;* those in plain clothes are not yet initiated." He opened the door and ushered Tony into a ballroom. There were about thirty people in the room, men and women gathered in small groups. If it had not been that most of them wore white cloaks, Tony might have thought himself at some fashionable soiree.

Elicia came toward him, her white cloak trailing behind her. Garnett excused himself. "I must have a word with some of the members. Elicia will look after you."

She took his arm. "Will you have coffee? I'm afraid we serve nothing stronger before our meetings."

"No, thank you." He looked around the room. A man he recognized as a Cambridge don was talking to a short man whose clerical gaiters showed beneath his cloak. In the far corner, three elegantly coiffed ladies were talking to a young man Tony knew to be a member of the royal family.

A white-cloaked man detached himself from a group and came toward them. It was Sergeant Bell.

"Good evening, sir." Bell gave him a wicked smile.

"Bell! You, too?"

"Indeed, sir. I was one of the original seven. I was the one who smuggled the sheikh aboard the troopship, dressed in a drummer's coat."

"Then it was no accident that you were able to open the box."

"I was a bit sly about that, sir. Your uncle was our *ruhan*. He was

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able . . . to 'see' things. It's a rare talent, and he believed that you might share it. That's why I was sent with you when you went into the army." He smiled. "To . . . observe your character and conduct. Your uncle was to talk to you about the order when we returned."

"Why did he wait?"

Bell looked down at his boots. "Well, sir. The feeling was . . . like green ale, you needed more time in the keg."

Elicia squeezed his arm and laughed. "Do you think he's drinkable yet, Bell? Or shall we leave him in the cellar?"

"I'd say we could pull the bung anytime now."

The double doors at the end of the room opened. Lord Garnett appeared in the doorway. He clapped his hands, and the people began to file into the other room. Tony followed Bell and Elicia. It was a high-ceilinged room, paneled with dark oak. At intervals along the walls were nine-branched candelabra shaped like peacock's tails.

Rows of hard leather hassocks sat on the polished floor, on either side of a central aisle. At the end of the aisle was a larger hassock, covered by a woven rug. In front of it, resting on a square of black and green cloth, was the box displaying the Egg. To its left was a brass urn, over which was mounted a large silver peacock. Smoke rose from the urn, making the bird shimmer in the light.

"We'll sit here, sir." Bell indicated two cushions on the left in the end row.

Lord Garnett came down the aisle and stood in front of the rug-covered hassock. He bowed, then clapped his hands. The assembly sat, their legs crossed, hands resting palm up on their knees. They sat, silent and erect, for what seemed to Tony an interminable time. He felt his right leg going numb, and shifted cautiously on the hassock.

Garnett spoke a word in some unintelligible tongue. At last a robed man in the third row got up. He bowed to Lord Garnett, then knelt and touched his finger to one of the silver prongs of the Egg. The man went back to his seat. At random intervals a cloaked figure would rise and approach the Egg. Some dropped what appeared to be small balls of paper into the urn. Twice, those who touched the Egg seemed to receive a shock, and were helped back to their places by a white-turbaned man in the first row.

At last the man in the white turban stood and clapped his hands. The men and women who were not cloaked rose and filed out after him. Bell nudged Tony. "That's the novice-Master, a *pir*. He's taking them for their . . . exercises. We'll have to go, sir. The rest of the meeting's only for the initiates."

Tony sat at the foot of the long ta-

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ble. At the opposite end, Lord Garnett sat with the closed box before him. Three men sat to Garnett's right, among them the Cambridge don. On the left were three women, including Lady Elicia.

"Lord Bellarmine," Garnett said formally. "This is the elected governing board of the Order of Malak Taus. It was your late uncle's wish, as *ruhan* of the order, that the custody of this box be entrusted to you, provided you were found to be of fit character." Garnett glanced at Bell, who gave Tony a faint smile. "And contingent on your freely accepting this burden. Of course, I do not expect you to commit yourself until you know more about us. . . .

"It has been agreed that I will discuss this matter with you privately, and if you decide to join us, I will personally undertake your instruction. Is that agreeable?"

Tony looked at the people gathered around the table. There was a sense of power in the room, a tangible presence. "Most agreeable, sir."

"Good, then. I will say only that while one of our aims is the perfecting of ourselves as fully awake human beings, the more important aim is for the good of all humanity. To see that this . . ." He tapped the box. ". . . does not fall into the hands of those who would use it for evil, and to continue our search for the other half of the Egg. We affirm the vows of our predecessors to the Green Angel, to send her message to the stars."

Garnett paused and nodded at the man Tony recognized as a member of the royal family. "We will now hear a report on the man known as the 'comte di Savoia.'"

"I have some information," the young man said. "From our friend in Whitehall. The 'comte' is indeed from Savoy. Though his patent of nobility is doubtful, he is related to the House of Savoy. It is reported that he is the son of an incestuous relationship between the late Cardinal Mazarin, prime minister to Louis XIII, and his niece Olympe Mancini, mother of Eugene of Savoy, and a woman noted for her skill with poison. He has strong connections with both the French and the Austrian courts, and is a man of immense wealth, though it does not come from any known inheritance.

"Whitehall suspects that he is connected with some secret political society. They know he is in the country, but not his whereabouts. He has dropped from sight."

Lord Garnett rapped the table with his fist. "That makes it stranger that he should contact Lord Bellarmine. Our late *ruhan* warned that the forces of the Red Angel were on the increase. He foresaw the possibility of a disaster, but the 'seeing' was not clear. Whatever the comte's connections are, they are not merely political."

Bell spoke up. "That fits with what my lads have found out. This Sutton,

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what was shot. Seems he works for a pair of crimps, Tooley and Smart, who have a place on the Fleet Canal. Do a good trade in pressing men for the army. . . ."

The Cambridge don interrupted. "I say. Isn't that illegal? By law one may press for the navy, but not. . . ."

Bell glanced at Tony and Lord Garnett. The innocence of civilians. Any old soldier knew that a company captain could pay a crimp four pounds for an unwilling 'volunteer' and still turn a profit on the man. "Yes. Well. . . ." Bell went on. "Tooley's the big man, and close as a clam. But Smart has a weakness for young girls. Likes to impress 'em, he does. He sees one or two regular, and we found out he's told the girls he's going to get rich. Says he and Tooley is working on something with a foreign gent, and that they'll come out of it with a thousand apiece." He paused. "I think we can guess what that 'something' is. . . ."

The white cockleshell driveway stretched its ghostly ribbon in the full moon's light, and the clean Chelsea air carried with it the scent of fresh-plowed earth.

Tony handed Lady Elicia into her carriage and climbed in after her, putting the box in its chamois bag on the seat opposite them. The coachman's trapdoor opened.

"Where to, Your Ladyship?"

"Milford Lane, Martin."

"Make that Garnett House first, Martin," Tony said.

"Yes, milord." The trap shut.

Tony looked at Elicia and smiled. "Wouldn't help your reputation if you were seen escorting a bachelor home without a chaperone."

"You are considerate . . . if conventional. What do you suppose my father might think if a rumor got started? He might feel obligated to ask your intentions."

He took her hand. "And what do you suppose my intentions might be?"

She leaned closer. "The same as mine, I should hope."

Tony threw his head back and laughed. "You do charge your fences. . . ."

She squeezed his hand. "Of course, Tony. Take them at the gallop. Any good horsewoman knows that. It reduces the risk of refusal."

Tony slipped an arm about her shoulders. "I shouldn't like to see you unhorsed."

Elicia leaned back into the curve of his arm. "Pinch the candle, please, Tony. I want to enjoy the moonlight."

Three men stood around the small fire in the center of the knacker's yard. The air was thick with the stench of animal blood and offal. Their horses, tied to a post by the fence, stamped and rolled their eyes. In the far corner, red-eyed rats scurried about the tallow vats.

The man in the green cloak tapped

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his leg with a lead-loaded billy. He was thin and narrow-shouldered, and his long arms hung like sticks from the frayed cuffs of his coat. He glanced at the other men.

"Where the fuck is Smitty?"

A short, muscular man with a convict's shaven head spit into the fire. "I ain't seen him, Smart. He's coming afoot. Lives hereabouts. Likely got his head in a bucket of ale."

Smart slapped the billy against his palm. "Got it up some tart's skirt, I'd say. He don't get here soon, we'll go without him. Bill, you got the rope?"

The fat, pimply youth grinned and pulled a thick black coil of rope from under his cloak. "I 'ave. Thin as thread and strong as silk. You could hang an earl with this one."

"Just get it right. Catch his head or chest. . . ."

"Don't worry. Come off like a ninepin, he will."

"He better. Soon's he's off, I want the wheel jammed and the traces cut." He pointed to the pimply youth. "You take the footman from the rear, and Bill will finish off the coachman. I want them all snapped . . . no witnesses."

The wooden gate behind them creaked open, and a tall man in a long-skirted coat came toward them. He had a canvas bag slung over one shoulder. A brass tube hung like a sword from his belt. Smart turned to face him.

"Where the fuck you been, Smitty?"

"Got lost on the way. Couldn't find the bloody place."

Smart grabbed the man and pulled him close. He stuck his beaked nose close to Smitty's face. "You windfucker. You've been slopping the gin." He slammed the billy into the man's stomach, doubling him over. "If I didn't need you, I'd use this on your thick head. Let's see what you brought."

Smitty straightened up. "Jeesus, Smart. You. . . ."

"Come on before I give you another."

The man opened the bag and pulled out a black iron ball the size of an orange. A waxed wooden peg protruded from one side of the ball.

Smart took it in his hand. "Heavy fucker, innit? You sure you know how to use it?"

Smitty wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Of course I does. I was a grenadier, wasn't I? It ain't hard to do it. You pulls the plug and sticks your slow match in the little 'ole." He took the smoldering match from the perforated tube and waved the glowing end in the air.

"How many you got?" Smart asked.

"They comes in bags of three."

"One'll do. Now as soon as the coach is stopped and the traces cut, you open the trap and drop it in, got it?"

"Nothing easier."

"It better be. The man's no courtfop; he's a major of dragoons. If he

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comes out fighting, we've got trouble." Smart turned to the other men. "You lot do your job. When it's done, mount up and scatter. We'll meet at Tooley's."

Bill pulled his curved hanger from its sheath and tested the edge with his thumb. "And while we're doing them . . . where will you be?"

"You ain't paid to ask questions, Billy-boy. I've got my job to do; you does yours. Slubber this one and you'll wake up in chains with a bilge rat sitting on your chest."

"How can you know they'll come this road?"

"That's been taken care of, you simple shit."

The gate to the knacker's yard opened. A ragged boy of nine or ten stood there, his chest heaving. "Mr. Smart . . . my da' says he sees them. They be comin' soon."

Smart flipped the boy a coin. "Off with you, boy." He turned to the men. "Snap 'em all . . . no survivors."

The carriage jerked to a stop. Tony heard the coachman curse and crack his whip. A man's voice shouted back at him. The trap opened. "There's been an accident on the road, milord," Martin said.

"What is it?" Elicia asked.

Tony reached over and lowered the glass window. He stuck his head out. "I can't tell. . . . Bales of hay all over the road."

Martin and the footman appeared, accompanied by a jowly man in a leather apron. "This man's got the road blocked," Martin said, shaking his whip.

The man looked up at Tony. "Sorry, milord. Axle broke and the wheel came straight off. Spilled the load."

"How long to get through?" Tony asked.

The man looked thoughtful. "Well. There's only me and my boy. If these gents was to help . . . we could get them bales shifted. The wagon's gone over on its side. . . . An hour or two, milord."

"Very well, get on with it."

The man slapped his forehead and looked at Tony. "Just popped into my head, milord. There's a way round." He pointed to a dark gap between the buildings. "If you swing down that lane, sir. Take the first left, then a left past the knacker's yard; you'll be back on the road."

Before Tony could reply, Martin and the footman started for their places. The whip cracked, and they turned right.

The springless carriage creaked and tilted in its leather slings as Martin urged the horses to a faster pace. The lane was narrow, and the houses on either side were derelict, stripped of roof, door, and window. In the moonlight, Martin could see that the lane was hard-packed and smooth. He urged the horses on with a low whistle. Another hour and he'd be

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home, with his feet up, a pipe in one hand and a pint of Lord Garnett's ale in the other.

The thin black rope caught him at the neck. His body skidded over the top of the carriage and struck the footman full in the chest. The footman cried out and dropped his pike as he was swept from his perch at the rear.

Lady Elicia stiffened. "What. . . ?"

Shadowy figures ran from darkened doorways. A man grabbed the off horse by the noseband. The horse veered right. A wheel struck the building. Sparks shot from the hub as it scraped stone. A sling-leather parted, and the carriage body swayed, then crashed against the wall.

Tony's head cracked against the side of the carriage. Glass sprayed from the broken window. Elicia landed in a tumble of skirts and lace at his feet. "Tony! My God. . . . !"

He reached for her as the carriage came to an abrupt stop. His sword caught between his knees, and he fell on top of her.

The coachman's trap was flung open. An object trailing a plume of sparks dropped through, a red, sparking eye, arcing through space. It hit the seat and bounced to the floor. Tony shoved Elicia to one side. In a single motion, he picked it up and threw it through the glass of the other window. He dropped to the floor and covered her body with his.

Smitty jumped from the carriage box. He hit the ground and turned. Glass shattered. The round iron ball hit the wall opposite him and rolled between his legs.

The explosion was deafening. Shards of hot iron ricocheted off the walls. The nearside horse went down, a spray of blood shooting from its neck. The other reared and galloped off, dragging the cut traces behind it.

Tony pushed at the door. It was jammed. He kicked it, ripping it from the hinges. It fell to the road, hitting the corpse of the ex-grenadier. He jumped down, pistol in his left hand, drawing his sword with his right. A bullet-headed man charged him, swinging a bloody hanger.

Tony fired. The pan fizzed like a web squib. A misfire. He dropped his pistol. Before he could draw the second one, the man was on him.

Behind him, Smart swung the leather billy. It glanced off his sword arm and struck the side of his head. He dropped the sword and fell forward, rolling on his back. He saw the bullet-headed man raise the curved hanger.

Lady Elicia leaned from the door of the carriage. Her dress was torn, and blood from a glass cut ran down her face. She gripped the small Italian pistol in both hands and fired.

The shot took the man in the forehead. He fell back and slumped against the wall. Elicia jumped to the road. "Tony. . . .!" There was a sound behind her. She turned as Smart swung

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his billy. The blow struck her on the shoulder and sent her sprawling over Tony's prostrate form.

"Bellarmine! Bellarmine ho!" A rider galloped up the lane.

Elicia raised her head as the man pulled to a halt. "Bell! Mr. Bell!"

A dark figure ran down the road toward the knacker's yard. Bell pulled the pistols from his saddle holsters and sent two rounds after the fleeing figure, then jumped from his mount. A horseman broke from the knacker's yard. At the far end of the lane, he turned right and disappeared.

Bell knelt by Lady Elicia. He put his arm around her and eased her up. "Milady! Are you all right?"

"Oh, Bell. . . . My arm. . . ." She flexed her fingers.

Tony rolled on his side and pushed himself up. "Bell . . . thank God you're here." He shook his head groggily.

"Lord Garnett told me to ride behind, to see if you was followed. Looks like I was too far behind."

Tony got up and leaned heavily against the wall. "It was a trap. I should have known . . . that bastard with the hay cart. . . ." He looked down. "Elicia!" A thin stream of blood ran from the cut over her eye. He knelt and pressed his handkerchief to the cut. "Just a scratch. . . ."

Her face was pale. "If it leaves a scar, I can always cover it with a beauty spot . . . like a courtesan." She tried to smile.

He lifted her to her feet. Her body was trembling and her voice broke. She pressed her head against his chest. "Tony. . . . They were going to kill you. . . ."

He stroked her hair. "Easy now. They were going to kill all of us. . . . If you hadn't got that man. . . ."

She looked up at him. Her eyes were teared, but she smiled. "I'm as good a shot as any Irishwoman, am I not?"

"Indeed you are, my love."

Bell returned from surveying the scene. He shook his head. "Haven't seen anything like this since the Bloody Hollow at Aughrim, sir. There's five dead. Two of ours and three of theirs. Sorry, milady, but Martin and the footman is done for. The footman got one with his pike 'fore he was run through." He kicked at the broken carriage door. It slid away, revealing the shattered body of the grenadier.

Elicia looked down. She turned and fled to the side of the road, retching. Tony picked up his misfired pistol and put it in his sash. "The box!" He scrambled into the carriage and fumbled in the dark. "Bell! They've got it."

"It's that count and Tooley's doing . . . ," Bell said.

Tony looked down the road. "That man got away. He must have taken it."

"He'll be heading for Tooley's, is my guess."

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"We must get after him, Bell. If di avoia gets his hands on that box, e'll slip out of the country and we'll ever find him."

"I'll be after him, then, sir. I know where Tooley's place is. . . ." He urned toward the horse.

"Wait, Bell. You can't go alone." ony trotted down the road and into he knacker's yard.

Elicia leaned against the carriage wheel and wiped the cold sweat from er face with Tony's handkerchief. ell squatted and recharged his pis- ols.

"What shall we do now?" Lady licia asked.

Bell lowered the pan covers on is pistols and stuck them into his elt. "Me or the major will have to be fter them before it's too late."

Tony came out of the knacker's ard leading two horses. "Knew those naves didn't walk." He looked at the odies. "They won't have any use for hese horses. We'll see Lady Elicia to arnett House, then be off to Tool- y's."

Elicia wound the drawstring of er reticule around her wrist. "No, ou won't, Tony. There's no time for hat. 'Whither thou goest. . . .'" She itched up her skirts and mounted he horse.

Tony stared at her long white- tockinged legs. He had never seen a ady sit astride. He looked at the set of her face. He could see that her oming was not an arguable point.

Sergeant Bell averted his eyes from Lady Elicia's legs. He rolled Smitty's body over and took the grenade bag and the smoldering slow match in its brass tube. "No point in leaving these behind," he said.

Tony wheeled his mount. "Lead the way, Sergeant Bell. Point-to-point . . . at the gallop."

The old house was built of solid gray stone. The roof was patched with tarred canvas where the black slates had fallen off or blown away. A faded wood sign hung flat over the door, held by rusty eyebolts from which ran long brown streaks like dried blood.

The nearly illegible words on the rotting wood read:

Bullitt & Sons —
Pedling Fewel Merchants

The windows of the house were barred with iron straps. The forecourt was rutted with cart tracks, now dried into granite-hard ridges. Scattered about were the broken hulks of wagons and coal carts, permanently mired by years of disuse.

The house stood on a slope facing the canal. A worn path wound from its loading dock to the stone wharf where the Fleet River flowed, sluggish and reeking, to empty its effluent into the Thames. At the foot of the wharf, a boat was moored; a boatman slept curled in the stern sheets.

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The man sat by the barred window. He was a large man with bulking shoulders. From his chest, his body sloped in ever-increasing rolls of fat so that he looked as if he had been made in layers. His head was bald except for a gray fringe of hair behind his ears. He dipped his pen and laboriously made a mark in the ledger before him.

Driftwood burned in the rough stone fireplace. The large, low-beamed room was hot and filled with the smell of stale tobacco, sweat, and human excrement. Across the room, the comte di Savoia put down his glass and shuddered with distaste. "I don't know how you can drink this slop, Tooley."

Tooley took a swallow from a greasy glass. "Sure, Yer Honor, a man like you is made for the finer things of life. For the likes of us, this is mother's milk."

In the far corner two men were playing cards. One looked up. "Mother's ruin, more like. . . ."

The comte paced the floor, his hands behind his back. "Where's your man, Tooley? He should have been back by now."

"Ah. Don't worry yourself about Smart. He knows what he's about." Tooley wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "About the payment, Yer Honor. . . ."

The comte stopped and rested his hands on the brace of pistols in his belt. "You'll get yours, Tooley. Whe
I get mine."

"What makes this box worth tw
thousand pound?"

The comte gave him a long lool
That fat fool. Once he had the bo
he'd give them all a taste of "mother
milk." The milk of Olympe Mancin
"Let us say it is a . . . family heirloom.
He sat down at the small table an
rested his hand on the black leathe
bag he had brought with him.

A knock sounded at the door. "Se
to it, Ben," Tooley said. The ma
picked up a short-barreled blunde
buss. He went to the door and sli
back the spy-hole.

"It's Smart."

"Well, let him in, stupid."

Ben turned the heavy brass key i
the lock and opened the door.

Smart staggered into the roon
"Christ! Tooley. . . . Those fucke
slubbered it. . . ."

The comte jumped up. "The bo
Did you get it?"

Smart drew the chamois bag fro
under his cloak. "I did, but it was
near thing."

"Where's the others?" Toole
asked.

"Dead."

Tooley grinned. Three less greed
hands in the pot. "Too bad, that."

The comte strode across the roon
and grabbed the bag.

"Hold on, there. . . ," Tooley said
"Ben. You stand watch outside whil
we finishes our business. No one in

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r *out* . . . 'till I gives the word."

"Right, Tooley." The man picked ıp the brass blunderbuss and went ıut.

"Lock the door, Smart. Now, Your ionor. About the payment. Two thou- and in gold. . . ."

"Not so fast, Mr. Tooley. You don't xpect me to pay unless I'm sure you ave the . . . merchandise." He sat at he table and withdrew the box. His eart raced. He pressed the jewels in equence. The top opened.

Tooley stood over him. "What's ıat, then?"

"Don't touch it!" The comte snap- ed the box shut. He gave Tooley a mile. "Let us say that what is right- ılly mine has been returned." He pened his black bag and took out a ax-sealed stone bottle. "Now, be- ore we settle accounts, let us have a rink of good French brandy . . . to elebrate your success, and of course ɔ mourn the loss of your brave com- anions."

Their horses clattered over the ɔlintered wooden roadbed of the ong Lane Bridge. Beneath them, ıoonlight silvered the gaseous yel- ɔw surface of the Fleet Canal. Bell alted his lathered horse.

"Not far now, sir. We takes the ɔwpath toward Clerkenwell. Anoth- r hundred yards or so, and we'd best ave the horses and go on foot."

"Move on, then. No time to waste," ony said.

They followed Bell at a trot. He turned off the path to a halt in a copse of stunted trees and brambles. "Just ahead. You can see it from here. . . ."

They dismounted, and Tony peered through the screen of brambles. The moon reflected from the gray facade, and yellow light filtered through the iron-barred windows. A lathered brown mare was tied to the end of a broken coal cart. Wooden steps led to the stone loading dock that fronted the house.

Bell moved to his elbow. "They've a sentry there. . . ."

At the end of the platform, Tony saw a man sitting on an upturned box. There was a glint of light on his weapon. They moved back quietly to where Elicia had tied the horses to a tree. She held her double-barreled pistol in one hand. "Tony . . . ," she whispered. "I had a look up the towpath. There's a small boat there, and a man asleep in it."

Tony turned to Bell. "Must be waiting to take the comte to his ship. I'm sure that horse in the yard is the one the man who stole the box was riding. We've got to move fast."

"The place is a bloody fortress; we can't just knock on the door and shout, 'Open up, in the king's name!'"

Tony put his hand on Bell's shoulder. "You've got those grenades. We'll take out the sentry and blow the door."

Bell gave a low laugh. "I'll take the

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sentry, sir. You do the honors. . . ." He passed the canvas bag and the slow match to Tony, then opened his shirt and removed the silken green cord of a *pir* from around his neck. He knotted the middle and snapped it taut. "Give me a bit of distraction when I gets to the dock."

Tony turned to Elicia. "You mind the horses. If anyone comes close . . . shoot." He kissed her, then followed Bell.

Tony crouched behind a broken wagon as Bell slipped into the shadow of the loading dock. He rose and threw a rock. It hit the dock and cracked against a barrel. The sentry stood and swung his weapon toward the noise.

Bell vaulted onto the dock. With his forearms crossed, he whipped the cord over the man's head and planted his knee in the small of his back.

Tony ran forward as Bell rolled the man's body off the platform. He unslung the canvas bag and took out the grenades, then pulled the wooden plugs. He knelt by the door and tied the bag to the handle by its carrying strap, then placed the grenades in it, fuse holes up.

Bell cradled the sentry's blunderbuss in one arm. He handed Tony a flask of fine-grained priming powder. Tony pulled the stopper and poured the corned powder into the bag. He took the slow match from its tube and blew on it.

"Fuse!" He dropped the match in to the bag.

They jumped over the edge of the dock and crouched. The explosion ripped the heavy door from its hinges. Hot metal and splintered wood sprayed across the yard.

Bell leaped up and charged the door, the blunderbuss at waist level. Tony followed, his pistol drawn. Two bodies lay on the floor. A hulking bald-headed man was stretched face down at a desk. At the far end of the room, a black-cloaked figure rose from behind an overturned table. The man fired. The ball took Bell in the leg. He went down.

Tony jumped to one side and crouched behind the desk. The comte moved toward a door behind him. Tony stood and aimed his pistol as the comte whirled. Both men fired. The comte's ball smashed into Tony's body. The force threw him back, and his head struck the wall.

Bell raised himself from the floor and fired the blunderbuss one-handed. The spray of shot ripped wood from the door as the comte slammed it behind him. Holding his stomach, Tony staggered to the door after him.

Bell pulled himself up. Blood ran down his leg. "Sir! Are you hit?"

Tony straightened up and grunted. "Not hit. Been kicked by a horse . . ." He pulled the misfired pistol from his sash. Bits of its shattered lock clattered to the floor. "Think my rib's broken."

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Bell steadied himself against the wall and looked at the scattered bodies. "Christ! Look at their faces. . . . Black as blood pudding, they are."

"Poisoned. That's the comte's work. We can't let him get away."

Bell took a step forward. His leg buckled, and he fell to the floor. Tony knelt by him and tore open the leg of his breeches. "Didn't hit an artery, thank God." He jerked off his cravat and folded it. "Hold this against it. . . ."

A shot sounded outside. "Keep the pressure on. . . ." Tony drew his sword and ran out on the loading dock.

Lady Elicia stumbled over the rutted yard. "Tony. . . !"

He jumped down and caught her in his arms. "Elicia! What is it?"

"It was him. The comte. I saw him come down the towpath. I fired at him . . . but he got away in that boat."

"I've got to get him before he reaches the Thames. He must have a ship waiting off Black Friar's Stairs. You look after Bell. . . ." He ran to the mare that Smart had left tied to the cart. "I'm going to stop him at Long Lane Bridge." He wheeled and galloped off.

He cut across the fields, charging the walls and spurring over the ditch banks, knowing he must keep the element of surprise. If the comte suspected pursuit, he could beach the boat and disappear into the dark.

At Long Lane Bridge he hid his horse in a stand of oaks, then raced to the middle of the wooden span. He looked downstream, praying that the boat had not gone past. The scummy yellow canal was empty as far as he could see. He knelt in the shadow of the railing. From upstream came the rhythmic creaking of oar against tholepin.

Tony peered through the railings. The boat was fifty yards away and moving fast. He could see the boatman's back and the flash of wet oars in the moonlight. A cloaked figure sat hunched in the stern sheets. Tony ran across the bridge and eased himself over the downstream rail. Sword in one hand, he clung to the rail with the other. The pain from his ribs made him feel faint, and his lungs were filled with the stench of the clotted water below.

The muffled sound of the oars came closer. As the bow shot from the shadows under him, Tony dropped. He hit the boatman's bent back. The man pitched forward with an explosive grunt. One oar snapped the tholepin and fell into the water. The boat tilted, and Tony was thrown against the thwart. Pain shot through his injured side, and he gasped for breath. The sword flew from his hand and went over the side.

The comte di Savoia rose from the stern sheets. "Bellarmine!" He drew his knife and lunged at Tony. Tony rolled to one side and kicked out,

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catching the comte on the hip. The man staggered back, then caught his balance. The knife flashed. Tony tried to rise. He twisted his body as the blow came. Like a red-hot lance, the blade struck his ribs and glanced off. Tony kicked again, striking the comte's chest. His hands found the oar. He pulled it from its pins and swung it like a two-handed sword.

The blow caught the comte full across the body. The boat tipped and slewed sideways in the current. The knife flew from the comte's hand and fell at Tony's feet. There was a cry and a splash as the comte went into the canal.

Tony pushed himself up. The boatman lay stretched out, his neck at an odd angle, his eyes open. In the stern sheets, Tony saw a black leather bag. He pulled himself toward it, pressing one hand against his bloody side. He felt the bag. Inside was the heavy, unmistakable shape of the box. He rested his hand on it. On the far bank he saw a black figure struggle up from the water. The man paused, looking back. Then he vanished in the night.

The boat drifted on the current. Tony fought to remain conscious. He heard a cry. "Bellarmine! Tony!"

On the near bank, Lady Elicia urged her mount down a muddy slope. She splashed into the muck and forced her horse forward. "Tony. . . . The line . . . pass me the line!"

He pulled himself to the bow. As Elicia came abreast, he threw the boat's painter, then slumped bac The moon went dark.

The H.M.S. *Avocet,* 165 tons ar sixteen guns, tacked full sail from tl Portsmouth harbor into the gr swells of the English Channel. Ca tain Phillip Foxe snapped shut h brass telescope. "You have the con Mr. Ransome," he said to his fir officer.

"Aye, aye, sir. Steady as she goes. . . the mate said to the helmsman.

"Steady as she goes," the ma repeated.

Captain Foxe looked at the cape figure leaning on the starboard ra He felt a sense of resentment. If n for this *civilian,* he might be makin profitable war against the Frenc But whoever this Lord Bellarmin was, he was certainly a man of infl ence. That a fighting ship, even sixth-rated one like the *Avocet,* shoul be put at the disposal of a civilian. . He sighed. Man proposes; Whiteha disposes.

He pocketed the telescope an moved to the lee rail. "Good da Lord Bellarmine. I hope you find you accommodations satisfactory."

Tony turned and gave him a smil "Excellent, Captain. We're all com fortable, thank you."

The captain looked up at the ove cast sky. "And your good wife, th Lady Elicia. Is she a sailor? We ma have a bit of weather."

Tony laughed. "She has a stomac

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ke a goat. I'll go green before she oes, I'm sure."

"I'd be honored if you'd dine with ıe, this evening."

"Delighted, sir." The captain left im and went below.

He leaned over the rail, watching ıe hypnotic rush of the ship's wake. ulls skimmed the water, their rau- ous cries carried on the freshening reeze. He touched his hand to his ıroat. Beneath the ruffled silk cra- t, he felt the green and black cord ıat marked him as a *ruhan* of the rder of the Peacock Angel.

A small hand touched his arm. ovely, isn't it?" Lady Elicia Bellar- ine leaned her head against his ıoulder. "What's that island?" She ointed.

"The Isle of Wight. The last we'll e of England for some time."

She hooked her arm in his. "I on't care. As long as we're together. ow long will it be to Malta?"

"Two weeks, *'Deo volente* and eather permitting,' as our captain ys."

She glanced at the first officer and ıe helmsman and lowered her voice. Are you certain he's there . . . di voia?"

Again Tony touched the cord un- er his shirt. "I *know* he's there. And ıe other half of the Egg is with him. 's taken a year and a half to trace ım, but now I'm certain. We have six men on the island watching his house. The vow that was made to the Green Angel will be kept. The message will be sent; of that I'm sure."

Mrs. Creasey's voice sounded behind them. "Lady Elicia! You must have your shawl. . . ." She draped it around Elicia's shoulders. "Everybody knows that sea air will give you a death chill."

"Thank you, Mrs. Creasey. And how is Sergeant Bell?"

Mrs. Creasey sighed. "Ah. The great lump. Sick already, he is. Says he won't get out of his bed until he hears the anchor drop." She turned to leave them. "I'll have a hot posset for you when you come down. Don't stay too long in this terrible sea air."

Elicia looked at the western horizon, where the sun broke through the clouds, a numinous shaft of golden light. "How long will it take? For the message to get to the stars?"

"No one really knows. Your father says there is a story that it will take three hundred years from the time the message is sent until the Angels arrive."

"Three hundred years. . . . That's 1992. . . ." Lady Elicia sighed. "When they come . . . will it be the end of all this war and destruction?"

Tony put his arm around her shoulders. "Yes, my love. I believe it will. . . . And much more than that. We have an Angel's promise."

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Paul McAuley's first F&SF story concerns an unwelcome visitor to an isolated community on a far-future Earth. Mr. McAuley is a research scientist and lives in England. His SF stories have been published in Interzone *and* Amazing.

The Temporary King

BY

PAUL J. McAULEY

I'll begin as all the old stories began, and tell you that once upon a time there was a great forest in the shadow of a mountain, and in a clearing of the forest stood a house built all of logs, and roofed with living grass. It was the home of the Lemue family, and the head of the family was my father; I was his youngest child and only daughter. That was how things were before Gillain Florey arrived.

I remember him even after all this time as well as if he had just now left the room. For I was the first of our family to see him, and I was the cause of his downfall. It was spring then, all those years ago. In the mud and new reeds beside the creek, frogs were calling hoarsely each to each; there was a scantling of green along the limbs of the dogwood and alder trees, and the flowers of the magnolias were just about blown; and every still po was mantled with a golden scum pine pollen, wrinkling in the wi like the blankets of uncertain slee ers. It isn't the same here, under t dome, where you notice the spri only by changes in the quality of t light if you notice it at all. When I w a child, the lengthening days and t warmer weather were only a part it. It was like a great reawakening, stirring; and I felt the same stirrin too.

I was seventeen then, yes, t same age as you. That's why I'm tel ing you this now. Seventeen, and felt as if I had done everything tha could be done in the forest. I felt trap ped, closed in, by the worn familiar ty of home, by the prospect of ma riage. Oh, I suppose I loved Elis Shappard, but it had all been arrange by his father and mine. I loved Elise

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but not in the way you'll love, freely, of your own choice. I felt that there had to be more, but I didn't know what. My family and the house and a small part of the forest were all I knew.

So that spring day, when my mother asked that someone go collect ivy sap — it makes a good red dye, and we boiled some of our wool in it — I went gladly, carrying a pot and a small knife up through the fern clumps that were just beginning to show new buds beneath the pines. And that was where I found the man.

He was stretched full out on a bank of ivy amongst the roots of a leaning pine, boots crossed one on the other, his trousers of some shiny, dark stuff, the flaps of his leather vest open on his smooth, naked chest. His face was as white as a woman's, and his hair long and tangled, like black snakes around his head. I remember how I hardly dared breathe as I looked at him, as if he were a vision conjured by the finest, most delicate of spells. And then his eyes opened. I dropped my pot and my knife, and I ran.

I made a fair commotion when I reached the house, scattering hens and geese as I ran yelling through the compound. People looked out of doors and windows to see what was happening, and I'd hardly had time to begin to gasp out what I'd seen — a man, a stranger, up in the forest — when someone cried out a warning and we all turned.

In the distance, someone emerged from the shadows beneath the trees and strolled down from the grass slope toward the house as if it were his own and he were returning to it. He briefly disappeared when he reached the ha-ha; then he had scrambled up the other side and started to cross the bare fields.

One of my uncles called, "Don't worry, Clary, we'll see him off!" and someone else swung onto a horse and, brandishing a staff, galloped toward the stranger. Behind him the others whooped and yelled encouragement. He swept past, and the stranger ducked the staff, raising his hand as the rider — it was my brother Rayne — checked his mount and turned. And then the horse stumbled, plowing into the ground in a tangle of legs and reins, Rayne tumbling over its head. Someone screamed, and someone else fired a shot that sprayed dirt a meter from the stranger's boots. Tall, white-faced, he turned to us and once more raised his hand.

The air turned white, white as the sun. It felt as if your eyeballs had all of a sudden turned inward and there was nothing in your head but cold, white fire. It was all so sudden that I didn't even feel frightened, was simply puzzled that I was lying on the ground with someone's boots in front of my face.

It was the stranger.

I picked myself up; all around, everyone else was picking himself up,

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too. The men shuffled uncertainly, all of their oafish bluster deflated by the magic. A dog barked a challenge and someone hushed it. We were all looking at the stranger, who was looking at me.

I felt a kind of laughter bubbling inside, a singing in my head, and I brushed at my dress and stepped up to him. I still don't know why I did it; perhaps I felt responsible.

He smiled and held out my knife, hilt-first. "You dropped this, Seyoura. I'm afraid your little pot was broken, though." The pupils of his eyes were capped with silver; there was something funny about his knuckles.

I became frightened, snatched the knife, and backed off into my mother's embrace. But the spell was broken. My father, pulling on his beard, cautiously approached the smiling stranger, then stuck out his hand, which the stranger looked at, then shook. The other men, all my uncles and brothers, began to crowd around, grinning, asking him how he had knocked us all down, how he could knock Rayne's horse over without touching it (leading the horse, which seemed none the worse, Rayne came limping up, ruefully shaking his head but grinning like the rest). My mother had once said that the games of men always required that someone be hurt, so that they would seem more important than they were; and now that it was all over with no more than a sprained ankle to show for it, they were babbling in relief. The stranger was the calm center of it all, smiling and shaking hands, telling them that his name was Gillain Florey, please call him Gil, that he came from another world.

I wanted to see more, but my mother pulled me toward the kitchen, scolding me and worrying about what might have happened in the same breath. All the rest of the day and all that evening, the kitchen bustled as we prepared a formal meal. My father had declared Florey to be the honored guest of the house.

"Which simply means extra work for us," my mother said, sitting as usual on one side of the great fireplace, her fat, naked arms resting on the arms of her high-backed chair as she watched her daughters-in-law and their children cook and carve and clean.

My grandmother, shrunken and frail in her own chair on the other side of the fire, said that outsiders always brought trouble, and it was lambing time, too; you couldn't expect the men to care about that now. I was carding wool in the corner by the door, pretending not to listen. I wanted to sit at the feast and hear all the stranger had to say, but of course I couldn't. I was only a girl. The only reports I had were the breathless exclamations of the women as they brought out empty plates and waited to take in the next course. One told my mother that the stranger claimed

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that his family had once lived in the countryside around, hundreds of years ago; another said that he had a little metal stick, and that was what had knocked us all down. "Fancy all this happening to us," she said, and scurried out with a platter of fruits as big as her head balanced on one shoulder.

"A three-day wonder," my mother said, picking at her own food. "And what good will it do us? That little stick won't get the lambs born or the seed sown, for all the men gape and gawk at it."

"In my day," my grandmother said, "we didn't have any of this trickery, not even the glowing-tubes. Just lanterns and candles. Though I do like the light now. It doesn't jump about so."

"One thing's certain," my mother said. "He isn't here to sell to us, much less give anything away. Live off us awhile and move on, I shouldn't wonder. I'll have a word about that."

But I wanted the stranger to stay; I wanted to gawk, just like the men. Later that evening my fiancé rode over and we sat at the edge of the fields. His dog lay a discreet distance away, her head on her crossed paws, as I told Elise all of what had happened.

Elise was scornful. "He's probably just some fake."

"How could he do what he did? You're just jealous because your family didn't find him." I felt that the stranger was mine in a way; as if I had charmed him awake and led him to the house. Yes, just like one of the old stories. By defending him I was defending myself. "If you ask my father, I'm sure he'll let you meet him; then you'll see he's no fake. He's real, Elise."

"I don't know."

"You ask. It's all right, you'll be one of our family soon enough."

"It's not that. I just don't want to, Clary. This man'll be gone soon enough and nothing will have changed, you'll see." And he leaned over and gave me a quick peck on the cheek. I leaned against him, stroking the bumpy top of his head through his short, crisp hair. He was a tall, lean, gawky boy, but handsome enough when he smiled, and gentle. I hadn't any choice in the matter —like all marriages then, it was an arrangement; and in exchange for my hand, my father would have certain rights of passage over the land of Elise's family — no choice, yes, it's true. But I felt lucky about Elise, cared enough for him not to press him about seeing the stranger.

So we sat side by side in the twilight, the lights of the house behind us, the dark forest rising beyond the flat, bare fields. The first stars were out, and you could see a few of the swift sliding lights that Seyour Mendana had once told me were ships and whole cities forever falling across the sky. I leaned against Elise, feeling the hard muscles in his arm, his com-

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fortable warmth, and wondered about the stranger, wondered which light he had stepped down from and why, until it was time for Elise to go.

Even after Elise had politely bid my mother good night and had ridden off, and I was lying in my own room unable to sleep, my thoughts were of the stranger, his white face and the way he had handed me my knife, the way he had lain there on the ivy in the forest, all unawares. He was somewhere in the house. The thought was thrilling and alarming, and I listened for some sign of his presence, but heard nothing except the usual night noises. And later, at last, I slept.

And the next morning, truly as if I had somehow stepped into a story where wishes come true, the stranger, Gillain Florey, came looking for me in the kitchen. He explained to my mother that he needed a guide for the day. "Just a little trip into the forest, back along the river."

My mother held the long braid that fell over her right shoulder and said that it was not the sort of thing a girl did. Florey smiled and told her, "Now, I know she goes up there because that's where she found me. And I can look after her. You saw my defenses, right?"

"It isn't exactly that," my mother said uncomfortably. I'd never seen her like that before: at bay in her own kitchen, her kingdom, as if she were no more than what she seemed, a fat woman twisting her braid in a fat white hand.

Florey's smile widened. His silver-capped eyes. His white, white teeth. "You're worried about her honor! I can assure you, Seyoura, that nothing is further from my mind. No, I need a guide, that is all, and I wouldn't divert one of your menfolk from their work. You know the problem I've been set. Well. I'm going up to solve it, if I can."

My mother began to deny precisely the thing she *had* been worried about, and Florey waved a hand negligently. "Please, you have not insulted me. No, not at all. Where is your daughter? Ah, *there*. Yes, come now. . ."

So I went with him, my heart bumping as we passed through the compound and crossed the fields, people gaping after us as if we were a parade. We followed the creek into the forest, and once we were out of sight of the house, Florey sighed and slowed his pace.

"I thought they might follow us. Well, that's all right."

"They wouldn't — I mean, you're a guest."

He smiled and I blushed. "I'm glad to hear it. I hardly slept at all last night. Even with this." He drew out, from a pocket inside a flap of his vest, a little tube.

"Is that what knocked us all down?"

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"To be sure." He showed me the clear lens set in one end, and in his hand it began to shine, growing so bright that I had to look away, blinking back tears and green afterimages.

"Brighter than a thousand suns. Well, not quite, but bright enough to cause disorientation with nanosecond pulses at the right frequency. The silver in my eyes protects me from that, you understand? The other end is a sonic caster. It'll put you to sleep, like that poor horse, but its range is limited. And that's all I have, which is why I didn't sleep much last night. But I'm a guest, you say. Well."

"What are you doing here?"

"To see the fabled ruins of Earth, of course. Escaping from civilization, if you know what that is. I can't believe the way you all live here. You're not in the net? No? Not even receivers? Not even electricity?" Each time I shook my head, his smile widened, until at last it seemed as bright as his light-stick. He laughed. "Well! Just about perfect. And no one bothers you here?"

"Only Seyour Mendana. And sometimes a flying machine brings a doctor."

"Who is this Mendana?"

"He buys the furs the men trap in winter. You're really from another world?"

"What? Oh yes, yes. Try and name one I haven't come from. Well. Looks like the M.C.C. really does keep you sealed off. About time my luck changed; perhaps I'll stay here after all. Come on, then, let's follow the river. Your father wants me to solve a problem. You really can't cross it farther up?"

"It runs too quickly, and there's a gorge, up beyond our land and the Shappards'. The creek is the border between us, you see. Down here there's only one path we're allowed to use on the other side, and we have to pay for that."

"That's what your father said."

For a while we climbed beside the creek in silence. Florey was awkward as he scrambled over the smooth white boulders the spring snowmelts had year after year tumbled from the higher slopes, and soon he was puffing and panting. As he perched on one great boulder, catching his breath, I asked at random — there was so much I wanted to ask — "What's the M.C.C.?"

He looked at me. "To be sure, the child doesn't know who owns her. The Marginal Culture Council: the M.C.C. They're what keeps you safe from the outside world — though to be truthful, if it weren't for San Francisco, I suppose the whole area would be sealed off."

"San Francisco?"

"A port. A couple of hundred kays from here. You really don't know, do you?"

"I'd like to. I'd like —" I paused, but I couldn't hold it back. "I'd like to see what it's like, outside the forest.

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Except I'll be married soon enough, and then I suppose I'll be too busy bringing up babies."

"To be sure," Florey said quietly. I don't think he understood me. He got up, and we walked and scrambled higher. When we reached a smoother part of the way, he had breath enough to ask me about my family. "I guess I should know whom I'm staying with."

"You really were going to leave?"

"Really. I thought your father was after my stuff, so that's why I asked you along this morning. A hostage in case of ambush, but there was no ambush. Really, you can go back down now."

"I'd like to go with you."

"O.K."

Now it was my turn to ask about him, and he explained that he was from a very rich family who grew something that made people immortal, that his home was a castle on a world called Elysium. "People from this continent settled Elysium before the war, hundreds of years ago. In fact, my ancestors came from this very region, which is why I went to San Francisco. My yacht is there now, waiting for me. Ever heard of the Californian Collectivists? No? Oh well, it was a long time ago. Anyway, I'm fabulously rich and have little to do, so that's why I'm here. An important person. You might contrive to mention to your father that if I'm harmed, a scramble rescue team will be out here at once. So he shouldn't get any ideas about kidnapping me, O.K.?"

I nodded solemnly: I believed it all, would have believed him if he'd said that on his world, men swam through the air like fish and slept on clouds. It was only later that I wondered why, if he was able to call up help so quickly, he had been afraid of anything my father could do.

But then, walking beside him over a thick carpet of pine needles at the edge of an ever deeper channel that the creek had carved for itself, I was too happy to think.

The way grew steeper, and at last we reached the series of waterfalls and deep pools before the gorge, and climbed beside them using the narrow paths deer had made. At the top, at the edge of the cliff, Florey looked into the gorge and white water that thrashed amongst rocks toward the glossy lip of the first waterfall, then pointed upstream and shouted above the roar of the water, "That's where I'll have the sheep cross!"

"But they always go through the Shappards' land. And besides, sheep can't fly, not on Earth."

"No need. Your father explained that he has to pay each year for passage to the fields or whatever higher up."

"The summer pasturage."

"Whatever. Well, your father asked if I could help; I think he hoped I'd stride into the midst of your neighbors and drop them left and right just as I had to drop all of you last night

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when the men tried to make fun of me. I have other ideas." He gestured grandly. "I will have a bridge built. There, where the gorge narrows."

I couldn't see what he meant, and his talk about suspension ropes and load bearing only confused me more. "You'll see when it's done, and your sheep will cross above your neighbors' land. Better than frightening people, eh?" Then he looked away sharply. "Who's that over there?"

After a moment Elise stepped out from behind a tree, his dog following at his heels. Florey ordered him to us, and he came reluctantly, apprehension in his look. His dog watched Florey with her yellow eyes, her teeth showing between her loose black lips. I think that if I hadn't been there, Elise would have run: men and their pride.

"He's my betrothed," I said to Florey, and told Elise, "I don't see what business you have following us around. If my father knew, he'd be mad."

"This is common land, up above the waterfalls, your father has no say here. Anyway, I was on my way to lay traps for banshee." Elise was looking at the ground between his feet. "When I saw you, I thought . . ."

"It's true," his dog said, her voice a low growl.

Florey lifted Elise's chin and said, "A handsome lad, Clary." Elise twisted away, scowling. "You're lucky to be in line for such a fine, caring husband. But why does everyone think the worst of me?"

"We're not used to strangers, I guess."

"I meant no harm," Elise said. "I just wanted to see —"

"I understand," Florey said. He was looking at Elise's face, at the spike-jawed traps hung at his belt, at his dog. "Are you walking back with us, young man?"

"I really have to set the traps." Elise looked at me. "I'll see you later, Clary. Good-bye."

"Don't hurry on my account," I called as he walked away, but he didn't look back. I was annoyed by his following us, as if my independence had been diminished, as if he had already married me, already taken possession.

"You'll make a fine, handsome couple," Florey said, and put an arm over my shoulder. We walked like that all the way back: I was never so happy.

For three days things went just as Florey ordered them. It was as if he had supplanted my father's authority, yet no one seemed to notice or to mind. The men felled a tall pine so that it lay across the gorge, and another was sawed into four and, using chocks and levers, the pieces were set at either end. Under Florey's instructions a complicated web of ropes was strung between the spine of the bridge and the pillars, and a plank

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floor was laid. The men began to grumble that sheep would never cross it, but Florey simply smiled and showed them how to build high sides that leaned against the rope webbing. "What they can't see can't hurt them, and they'll follow their leaders. Sheep are like men, yes?"

I contrived to be near him as much as possible, taking up his food and running errands and looking after the notched stick and the weighted twine he used to work out how the ropes should hang. No, never so happy as then. He had us all under his spell, whether he was striding about and ordering the men in short bursts of energy, or sitting with his back against a pine trunk, amongst the feathery shoots, his eyes closed as I watched his white face.

And in the evenings there were his stories.

Florey would hold forth to the whole family for hours, pausing only to drink from the mug of cider I kept topped up for him as he told us about the other worlds: the singing stones of Ruby; the oleaginous oceans that girdled Novaya Rosya, boiling in summer and frozen in waxen floes in winter; the great canyon where everyone had to live on Novaya Zyemla; the beautiful empty seacoasts of Serenity. He described them all so vividly that we might have been there ourselves, and told tales at once so fantastic yet so plausible that the very trees seemed to lean closer to listen. Then he would smile and stretch all his length like a cat and say that it was time to sleep, and we would all be left gaping at each other, slowly becoming aware of the creek's babble and the mosquito bites we had not heeded, the cold night air and the babies and animals bawling to be fed.

Even Elise stayed still all of one evening, but afterwards he said to me, "Those tales don't really matter, Clary." He held one of my hands tightly, as if he were afraid I might fly away to one of Florey's fabulous worlds. And I would have, if I could.

"Gil makes them sound real. Isn't that the same?"

"He's got you bewitched, all of you in this house. That's what my father says."

"Your father's just jealous. So are you."

He ran a hand over his head, his short hair making a crisp sound beneath his palm. "I guess I am. Aren't you to be my wife, Clary?"

"Oh yes, it's all arranged."

"Except that bridge means your father won't need the bride price anymore. Do you think he'll still let you marry me?"

It hadn't occurred to me that the bridge would make so much of a difference. "I suppose it's gone too far to be stopped." His anxious look touched me: I still cared for him, I realized. "Don't worry, I'm not going to run away from the marriage."

"Then you shouldn't be hanging

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round this stranger, like, like —"

"You aren't my husband yet, hough. So don't tell me what to do."

We stood staring at each other, an-ry and frustrated. The frogs were roaking to each other down by the reek; in the other direction, by the ouse, someone sang a snatch of an ld song, her voice clear and small in he night. *O the times they are a-banging* . . . Elise swore and turned n his heel and stumped off along the ank of the creek to where he had ethered his horse, beside the ford. lis dog looked at me for a moment, hen yawned and turned and loped fter her master.

The next morning we hadn't been p by the bridge for an hour when lorey said suddenly, "Are there any uins nearby, Clary?"

"Some. There are ruins everywhere, I guess. Do you want to see hem?"

"Yes. Right now."

"But what about the bridge?"

Florey gestured at the men, naked o their waists, who were cutting and haping planks for the sides. "They now more about carpentry than I do. 'll have to show them how to fit it all ogether, but that won't be until tonorrow at least. We won't be miss-d." He picked up the bag that contain-d the food I'd brought, looked at me vith his silver-capped eyes, and smil-d. "Don't tell me you're scared . . ."

For a long time we walked through the forest without speaking, Florey swinging the bag at the new, tightly curled heads of the ferns. Sunlight slanted between the dark layers of the trees; once we saw a parrot fly off, and a moment later heard its shrieking alarm call. But I couldn't stay silent forever, and the question I most wanted to ask, because it was the thing I most feared, at last had to be spoken.

"Are you thinking of leaving?"

"Oh, I can't stay here forever." He grinned at me, then broke into a run; and I ran, too, chasing him through the clumps of fern underneath the trees, until at last we collapsed breathless with laughter beside the bole of an enormous pine, a grandfather of the forest.

For a while we did nothing but breathe hard, smiling at each other. Then Florey reached up to touch the trunk. "Look."

A glutinous tear of sap was oozing from a crevice in the papery bark. A scarlet beetle struggled in it. "Once upon a time your ancestors ruled over half this world, and half a dozen besides. Your ancestors, and mine. Now look at your people, ruled by Greater Brazil and not even knowing it, trapped in their little lives. Insects in amber. You're different, though, aren't you?"

"I . . ."

"Sure. You want to escape." And he leaned forward and kissed me.

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I pulled back, but only a little. His silver eyes were a centimeter from mine; his hands touched my face before he sat back, smiling.

His hands . . . I caught one, the left. The knuckles were slightly swollen, and I could feel something thin and hard sliding under the bump of bone in each.

"All right," he said, and made a fist. And from his knuckles sprang claws, black and curved to a point like thorns, the one above the thumb slightly larger, a spur like that of a bird of prey, tipped with translucent gold. "I had it done a few years ago, when I signed up and out. The freighter ended up on Serenity, and this was the fashion there, briefly. Still comes in handy in fights, once in a while." He touched my cheek, and I felt five pricking points, the nearest (the thumb) just beneath my eye. Now I did jerk back, and stand.

"I thought you had your own ship. You said . . ."

Florey brushed at his forehead. "Oh yeah, that." He stood, too, brushing pine needles from his knees. "Can you keep a secret, Clary?"

"I guess."

"What I said when I first came here, about being rich and so on, that was to impress your father. So he wouldn't throw me out, so he'd take notice of me. Oh, I'm no duke, just a freespacer, but I do come from Elysium . . . and I'm not freeloading. That bridge will *work*. Understand?"

"A little." But I wasn't sure how felt about him now, what his untruth meant.

"Come on, show me the ruins. He held out his hand, and after a mo ment I took it. And like a fool led hi on.

The ruins began as a long ribbo of clear ground between the tree only thick, spongy cushions of mo grew there. You walked along th and suddenly realized the rocks o either side were the remains of wall all overgrown with grass and fer and then you were in the middle of i tall trees growing up through wh had been houses, square doorway gaping like the mouths of caves. Som had left no trace but the shape their cellars, deep pools of still gree water over which clouds of mosqu toes swirled.

Florey poked around for a fe minutes, then complained, "I thoug there'd be more than this. What ha pened to all the machinery?"

I didn't know what he meant.

"Metal," he said impatiently, "o plastic. Christ, it couldn't all hav rotted away. There must be som thing worth taking. What's insid here?"

He stooped at a doorway curtaine with ivy, and I caught his shoulde "You can't go in there. Bears live i some of these old places. They can b dangerous."

"So can I." He drew out his ligh

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ick and flicked it on, pushed through he ivy. After a moment I followed, ny heart beating quickly and lightly. Holding his light high, Florey stood at he beginning of a spiral ramp that urved down and down. You couldn't ee the end of it. Bright colors glisened on the walls in twisting abtract patterns. You felt that you vould fall into them forever if you ooked for too long. Here and there nud had been daubed in crude symols: the traces of bears. I pointed hem out.

"They live in the rooms underieath. No one knows how far it all xtends. They say it underlies all of he mountain." It was cold in there, nd I hugged my shoulders as I peered nto the flickering shadows of the piral ramp. "The bears can be danerous. They speak a kind of Ameriin, but it isn't much like ours."

"Our ancestors, Christ. Why did hey trouble to alter bears? They were razy, Clary, you know? They did so nuch damage to the world at one ime that they spent most of their nergies afterward putting it back ogether, changing animals to make hem more intelligent, raising extinct pecies from dust. What do you think he bears are guarding down there?"

"It was all looted ages ago. Come on, Gil, please." I thought that I could ear something moving far below, in he darkness. After a moment he hrugged and turned to follow me ut into the sunlight.

I sat in the shade of a little aspen that canted out from the remains of a wall, and watched Florey prowl the ruins. The sunlight sank to my bones, and I closed my eyes. After a while Florey sat beside me. His white chest, the single crease in his flat belly. His black hair tangled about his white face.

"Is it true," I asked, "about the people in the old days growing animals?"

"Surely. Plants, too. Greater Brazil may have invented the phase graffle, but it's way behind the old biology. That was all lost in the war, like a lot of things. On Elysium we lost Earth, you know."

"What's a phase graffle?"

"It keeps a ship together in phase space. A sort of keel into reality, you understand? Otherwise the entropic gradient would spatter it all over the universe."

I sighed. "I wish I knew more."

"It's a big universe outside this forest. You're better off here, really you are." His silver eyes flashed in the sunlight. His knee leaned negligently against my thigh.

I don't know how it happened; the beginning was lost in the deed. But one of us must have made a move toward the other, a word, a touch. I don't remember whether it was Florey or me, but we were tangled together, kissing, and then he began to make love to me and I surrendered. It didn't last long. Afterward I lay still

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while Florey rearranged his clothing and said, to the ruins, to the sky, "A virgin! Well, well. A virgin!" He seemed both delighted and amused.

A stone was digging into my shoulder, and my skin stung where his claws had scratched all down my sides, but I lay in a kind of haze of fulfillment. I had changed something, made a move all my own; and as I tenderly watched Florey, I imagined leaving the forest with him, rising amongst the lights in the sky with him . . . and then I remembered Elise. A kind of panic seized me, and I began to cry, although there were no tears, just a sort of racking hiccup attack, absurd and not at all romantic. Of course Florey tried to comfort me, and that made things worse.

"I won't tell," he said. "Don't worry."

"It's not that. It's . . ."

"Your fiancé, yeah. He kind of hates me, doesn't he?"

"He's just . . . just a jealous kid."

"Listen, Clary, I'm maybe ten years older than he, but that's all. I'm human, too. I didn't ask to be raised into some kind of god." As if the thought had struck something in him, he repeated, slowly, "Some kind of god. Jesus Christ."

"I think you could be head of my family if you wanted."

"No, Clary, see, your father tolerates me because I'm helping him, raising his prestige. That's all. Listen, I'll have a talk with your young man, set him straight. He's kind of cute you know. I'd be unhappy to think he dislikes me."

"I don't see how —"

But Florey smiled. "Don't I have a way with words, now? Come on, smile That's it. I'll fix it up, you'll see. You ride a horse?"

"Not often."

"But you have, yes?" All at once he was brutally businesslike. "So don't worry about your maidenhead, O.K.?"

I said helplessly, "I love you," and felt the guilty pang that goes with letting slip a lie, and didn't know why Of course I know now that I was in love not with Florey but with the idea he represented, the idea of freedom of flying away from the forest.

"You can't come with me, Clary My life is kind of complicated right now."

"You've done something wrong haven't you?"

He was silent for a moment. His silver eyes were unfathomable, and began to feel afraid. Then he sighed "Yeah, you could say that. You won' tell anyone."

"Oh, we both have our secrets to keep." Everything, the bright sunligh spinning amongst the new leaves o the aspen, the soft green ruins, the spring air, mocked me. I was a dark discordant blot in the center of it all When Florey held out his hand to help me up, I ignored it, and we didn't touch, and hardly talked, all the way back.

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At the house, I went straight to my room and scrubbed the dried blood from my thighs and my dress with cold, clean water, rinsing over and over until my skin was red and sore. Then I lay down and cried — real, hot tears, but not for long — and went down to the kitchen and helped prepare supper as if nothing had happened. If my mother noticed anything, she kept it to herself.

That evening as usual, Florey sat out near the creek with a half-circle of people before him as he recounted one of his stories. I could hear his lilting cadence from my bedroom window, all meaning botched by distance, and I had to pull my bolster over my head so I could sleep.

The next morning I didn't go up into the forest but worked in the kitchen, preparing vegetables and then scrubbing the long, scarred pine table until it shone white and my fingers were raw. It was a kind of penance. My mother watched me work, and at last brought me a parcel of food.

"You'll be carrying this up to your friend, I suppose."

I had to take it: to refuse would have been to admit that something had happened.

"Clary," my mother said, and brushed her long hair back from her round face. "Child, I haven't said anything before, but be careful. He's a stranger, remember, not our own kind."

"Don't be stupid, Mother."

"Don't you be, Clary, that's all. Think of Elise. You're hurting him, and by doing that you're hurting both families. Life has to go on, Clary."

"Oh, of course. Everything has to be as it always was." My grandmother was watching me, from her corner, her sunken eyes bright in her wrinkled face, and suddenly I felt trapped. I grabbed the parcel and ran out, was crossing the fields before I remembered that I didn't want to see Florey.

But he wasn't at the bridge; my father told me that the Seyour Florey had gone on up. "He said that he wanted to see what it was like. An odd one, eh, Clary?"

I remembered what Florey had said about seeing Elise, and felt cold. Things were getting out of control. I would have fled after him, but my father began to tell me about the work on the bridge. This was meant kindly enough; he thought that I was interested, didn't see my panicky impatience. "I don't know why we didn't think of it before, but it's a fine idea." He scratched his grizzled beard. "You're like me, aren't you, Clary? You like new things. Not like your mother, keeping herself in her kitchen." For it was my father's idea, not wholly inaccurate, that my mother was forever plotting against him.

My brother Rayne was chopping a

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pine log into wedges while my father talked: the sound of his ax rang amongst the trees, and each blow was like a blow in my heart. At last I could bear it no longer.

"I have to go," I said, "so the Seyour gets his lunch."

"Oh, he'll be down with us soon enough. Wait up, Clary!"

But I was already halfway across the new bridge, the rough, unseasoned planking swaying under my bare feet so that I had to cling to the rope hand-guide. The cladding was finished on only one side; on the other side I could see, fifty meters below, thrashing white water. Droplets stung my face as I went, and then I was safe on the other side and I turned to wave to my father before I went on, climbing through the forest toward the high pastures.

I left the trees behind, and fresh breezes blew down the grassy slopes into my face; beneath my feet the turf was as warm as fresh-baked bread. Our family's sheep should have been at pasture by then, but the men were waiting until the bridge was built, and their small, turf-roofed hogans were shuttered and empty. Higher up I could see the Shappards' flocks slowly moving against the green mountainside; higher still, the snow-covered double peak flashed in the sunlight.

My worries seemed to fall away as I climbed, insignificant beneath the vast blue sky. I dissolved in the breathless now of the spring day, swinging the greasy parcel of food as I tramped upward, stopping now and then to sprawl on the turf and look at the line of the forest below, the long, tree-clad ridges that saddled away on either side, vanishing into the hazy distances. Someday I would find out what was beyond them, even though I would be married to Elise. If my mother could handle my father, I could handle him.

And then I saw Elise's dog.

She came running toward me at her full speed, overshooting and turning back to posture frantically, so excited that her few words were no more than panting barks. "'ome, 'ome,' she managed to say at last, "follow me, 'lary!"

I asked what was wrong, but all she would say was, "Ba'. Ba' thing 'ome!" And she grabbed my wrist pricking it all round with her teeth tugging gently but impatiently.

Sheep scattered before us as I followed her, the bells of the leader clonking dully. A high bluff jutted out of the slope, cloaked in blueberry bushes. When we reached it, the dog circled me, then growled, "Ba' thing," and led me through the bushes.

And there, in a hollow on the other side of the bushes, I saw them: Elise and Florey.

Both were naked, moving like starfish on each other.

And I ran, plunging through the bushes with the dog at my heels, out

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cing her as she turned back to her ster. I remember thinking that I ıstn't drop the parcel of food, oth-ıvise they would know who had en there. That seemed important the time. If they didn't see me, it ıuld be all right. I didn't stop run-ıg until I reached the first trees, ı then I had to stop, and leaned ·inst the fragrant bark of a pine as I ıbingly caught my breath.

At last I could go on, and I took · old path down, my mind as empty the shafts of sunlight that fell be-ɔen the trees. The path followed a ge around the valley in which the ·ppards' house lay, its tangle of ıfs and pinnacles small in the dis-ce as a toy's, and I broke into a run in, crossing the ridge and plung-down through the trees, leaping m white stone to white stone at ford and running on toward my n house. My mother was in the yard ding the chickens — and then she ·me and dropped the little sack of in just as I crashed into her oh so ıiliar bulk.

It all came out in bits and pieces. I uld start to say something and n begin to cry, shaking my head ·y from my mother's soothing hand. my mother was calmly insistent, ening to all I had to say but not ieving any of it until I timorously ıwed her the scratches Florey had de along my flanks.

"Child, child."

My aunts were all there, too, by now, watching me to see if I would explode or change into a lizard, do something at once wonderful and dreadful. But I did nothing except cry, quietly and steadily now, sniffling and wiping my nose on the back of my hand.

"Child, child."

"Something," my grandmother pronounced from her corner, "something must be done. Or he'll bring ruin to us all."

"Stop crying, child," my mother told me. "We'll think of something."

"How can we do anything against him?" It was my aunt Genive, nervous as a squirrel. "I mean, with that stick of his, even the men couldn't —"

"Men, Jenny, know nothing useful," my mother said. "We'll be more subtle. Go on now and get some ivy leaves. A double handful will suffice."

Genive opened her mouth, then saw my mother's expression and darted out of the kitchen.

"What — what are you going to do?"

"Wipe your nose, child. We'll befuddle this Seyour Florey, that's what, and take him down a peg or two as he deserves. Duke indeed. He won't stay around here when we've done." She lifted out the flagon of cider cooling in a tub of water and poured it into a pan on the stove. The sweet, sharp smell of apples filled the room as she stirred, and when Genive brought in bunches of ivy, my mother plucked the leaves and one by one dropped

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them into the pan. In her corner, my grandmother chuckled and nodded.

"The old ways, oh yes. He'll see."

"You taught me," my mother said. Every face was intent on her as she stirred; we must have looked like a coven of witches. Now the smell of apples was tinged with something earthy and bitter. My mother lifted the pan from the stove and said, "We'll strain it when it's cool. Clary, tonight you'll pour the Seyour Florey's drink for him when he tells his lies, and make sure he has his fill."

I nodded, although I didn't understand.

"You'll see," my mother said, and rumpled my hair. "Now, tell me what you know of his weapons."

As Florey talked that evening, spinning out a tale about the jungles of Pandora and the old ruins hidden within them, I sat at his elbow and topped up his mug with the adulterated cider as my mother had ordered. Earlier, Florey had cornered me in the yard and told me that everything was all right with Elise, he would come down later on and make up with me.

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak.

"You're trembling. You're not frightened of me, now. After our time in the ruins?"

"A little."

He laughed and looked around — not one was about — and bent printed a kiss on my lips that bur all evening. Later, when I came u him as people were settling aro the stump on which he sat, a k with his court at his feet, and pou his first mug of cider, he winke me and whispered, "Don't wo Clary," and drank off a draft. I loo away, ashamed at my betrayal but f ing at the same time a sick eager for it to be over: that image of Flo and Elise burned in my mind as F ey's kiss burned on my lips.

As ever, Florey gulped down eral mugs of cider as he wove spell of his tale, my family spread fore him and the evening darker beyond the various ridges of house. My mother was in the fron the audience, flanked by my a like a queen amongst her attenda a gnarled walking stick I recogni as my grandmother's lying like a s ter in her lap. I couldn't stop look at her.

"More cider," Florey said, a quickly poured, spilling some. drank and held out the mug ag said to no one in particular, "I drug in all the worlds, alcohol, cause it's the oldest. Though something in my pack that wo make you all feel as if you were in very hands of your God." He dr again, then pushed the mug into face, saying, "Drink, too, girl, go c I closed my eyes and sipped. Sw with the faintest bitter tang bene

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My mother had put in mead to disguise the taste of the ivy. Florey tilted the mug, but I closed my mouth so that the cider ran down my chin and spilled onto my dress.

"Flower of the forest, this girl. Where was I? Yes, the ruins, circled by bare ground that had been poisoned to keep out the jungle, the ruins in the sunlight. Picture it," he said, and briefly closed his eyes. "But you all know about ruins, yes? Ruins all over the Earth. They're all around you. You're living out your lives" — he belched — "your lives in the wreckage of the past. It's in your faces, I see it in your faces. Christ, and your eyes, too, like holes in the past." Florey leaned forward, staring intently at his audience. I could see a dark rim of dilated pupil circling the silver caps in his eyes. "You're feeding on me, on my words. No more."

People began to whisper; I saw Rayne say something to my father, who nodded grimly. The spell had been broken.

Florey staggered to his feet. "No more, no more tonight." He swayed, and cider spilled from the mug. "No more. Head too thick. Fresh air and exercise. Clary —" Florey reached for me.

"No!" It was my mother, on her feet, with my aunts rising around her. Florey turned and reached inside his vest, and my mother swung at him with the stick, knocking aside his arm and sending him sprawling, striking him again as he tried to rise. Then all the women were upon him, and I saw his hands amongst them, claws extended, slashing and slashing again, and somehow he was free, staggering back while Aunt Genive knelt over a puddle of blood, her own blood dripping from her torn face. My mother stood over her; Florey's light-stick was in her hand.

The men were all on their feet now, and my father started to say something but my mother silenced him with a look. "He raped Clary. This guest you brought under our roof. He'll die for it."

Florey held out his hands, glancing at the crowd behind my mother, glancing at me. "You can't hurt me with that," he said. "I have protection, remember?"

"But I can put you to sleep," my mother said. "I know how to do it: my daughter told me."

"Ah, your daughter."

Then Florey sprang, but not at my mother. I was seized and spun and found myself pulled tightly against him, his claws at my throat. "You can't put us both to sleep. Give me my weapon."

My mother shook her head. Some of the men were beginning to edge out of the crowd, and Florey called to them. "If you love this girl, you won't go for your guns, or follow me either. I'm walking backwards now. Don't follow. Come on, Clary."

His right arm crushed my right

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breast; his claws pricked my throat. I moved backward with him, stepping amongst the seedlings in the newly turned field, then onto the rough grass beyond. My mother stood still, my family gathered behind her. Then Florey grabbed my wrist and yelled, "Run!" and dragged me toward the trees. People shouted and a deadening tingle started up my back; then we were in the darkness beneath the pines, my feet flying of their own accord as I struggled to keep up with Florey's long strides. His grip was a circle of pain on my upper arm; when at last we stopped and he let go I felt blood trickle down my side from the four closely spaced wounds made by his claws.

Florey looked back through the dark trees. "Sonics work only at close range," he said. "Fortunately. I thought we were almost done for, girl, but they aren't following. Not yet, anyway. Come on."

"They might leave you alone if you let me go."

"I don't think so. You'll have to come with me after all. Don't cry. You wanted adventure." He pulled me close, stooping so that his eyes glittered a handbreadth from mine. His breath was sickly sweet. "There was something in that cider. My heart is pounding in my head."

"My mother —"

"Oh, of course, your mother." He gripped my arm, and as we half-walked, half-ran through the dark forest, he talked and talked, his fear bleeding out in ravings and threats and sheer bluster that I hardly remember now. All of us in the forest were barbarians was the gist of it; we had betrayed our inheritance. "Elysium sank low enough when war cut us off from Earth, but not as low as you. Just two hundred klicks away, girl, ships lift for every world in the Federation, while here it's all superstition and darkness. Christ! First you tried to make me into some kind of god, and now this."

He gave me a little shake, glared at me, and dragged me on. We were near the bridge now.

And then I saw someone coming toward us through the shadows. It was Elise. When his dog recognized Florey, she growled, her ears flat. Florey whispered to me, "Keep quiet, girl. Or I'll mark you so no one'll want you."

Elise hailed us cheerfully enough, but he was obviously puzzled. Florey grinned. "We're just out for an evening stroll. Hoped we'd run into you. How are you, boy?"

"It's dangerous in the forest at night." Elise was looking at me; I tried to smile, failed, and looked away.

"Don't worry, boy. You know my weapons. Remember? Go on down and we'll follow in a bit. I want to see how the bridge is holding up. Clary's father was asking after you earlier, seems he wants a word with you about something."

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"Is it all right, Clary?"

Florey was watching Elise now, and had let go of my arm. It was my last chance, and I took it. I said, "I saw you both, this afternoon."

For a moment neither Florey nor Elise understood; then it struck them both. Florey slashed at me, but Elise's dog reached him first, knocking him down and climbing his chest, growling. Florey's fist swept across her muzzle, and the growl became a high-pitched whine that cut off as Florey slashed again. I backed away until I fell over something, a pile of pine wedges with an ax beside it. As Florey scrambled to his feet, I threw the ax to Elise.

"Now boy. Now Elise . . ." Step-by-step, Florey moved toward Elise, who slowly backed away, the ax raised at his shoulder. "Remember what you told me, what I told you this afternoon? You don't want her, I know; I can give you everything you want. Come on now."

Elise's face was a white blur in the twilight; I couldn't see his expression. He had reached the edge of the gorge and glanced at the drop behind him before he said, "No."

"Then I'll go. That will be all right, yes?" That cloying voice, smooth and sticky as honey. "Just go, leave you be." He was almost on Elise now. I couldn't move. And Florey reached out, just as Elise brought the ax down.

The blow swung Florey around. He sank to his knees, clutching at his chest; darkness spilled his white fingers. Elise swung again. Without a sound, Florey toppled over the edge.

After a moment, Elise threw the ax after him, turned to me. "I love you," he said, and ran. I called after him as he plunged across the bridge, but he didn't look back. Soon he was lost amongst the trees on the other side.

There isn't much more to tell. Outsiders came looking for Florey a few weeks later; it seemed that he had killed someone important in San Francisco and had been on the run ever since. But we had burned his body — it had washed up by the ford — and told them nothing. My father had the bridge cut down: I think my mother made him do it. For a while I used to climb up to the clearing where it had been and sit alone and think, but then I became betrothed to someone else.

No, not your father. I'm not quite done.

Things had changed. Florey's stories had spread amongst the families, and month by month a few people left the forest for the larger world; in turn, this slow exodus brought the curious to us, off-world tourists in search of the more outré corner of Earth, illegal hunting parties, once an archaeological team that spent an entire summer digging over the ruins where Florey had taken me.

And Elise came back, just once. Two years after he'd run away. He'd

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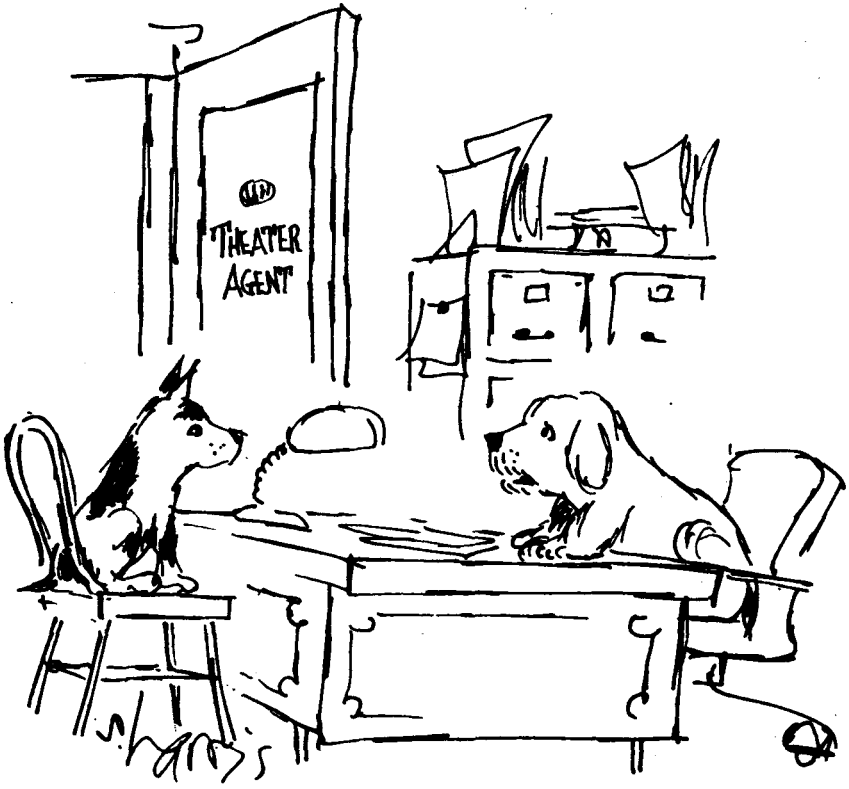
become a freespacer, sailing the sea of space between the stars, had gained a swaggering, bold manner and sought to impress us with wild tales of the wonders he'd seen.

But we were no longer in need of stories. The old days were dead, buried with Florey, our oh so temporary king. They won't come again. Soon after Elise left the forest, I left, too, abandoning my family and the kindly, slow-witted man to whom I'd been betrothed, whom I'd never really loved. And came to the city, yes, and met your father. As for the rest, well, you know it as well as I.



"Forget it, kid — talking dogs are a dime a dozen."

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Dean Whitlock writes that he is 36 and lives in Vermont with his wife, 3 cats and a word processor. "I've been many things, including research technician, shipping clerk, carpenter, and teacher, but I've had my biggest successes as a journalist and technical writer." "The Million Dollar Wound" is his first published story.

The Million-Dollar Wound

BY
DEAN WHITLOCK

Hell," Billy said, "it's only a year. I can make it through a year." He killed his beer and threw the can at the box of empties. "Besides, if I'm lucky, I'll get the million-dollar wound."

He grinned at Frank and me, expecting agreement. We looked at each other and looked back, faces blank. He looked amazed.

"Shit. What the hell do they teach you in medic school? The million-dollar wound is your ticket home. A clean shot through a thigh muscle, a little blood, a little hurt. Keep it clean and it heals right up, but first they give you a Purple Heart and send you Stateside. My grandfather got one in Viet Nam. He was drafted, too, same as us."

He popped open another warm beer, drank the suds off the top, and grimaced. "This pedro beer is real piss."

Frank and I finished ours and took more. "Help if it was cold," Frank said. He went back to his book, and I put a couple of cans in the freezer with the blood.

"Shit, nothing would help this crap," Billy replied. But he kept drinking it.

Billy was the kid of the unit, or looked it. Small, blond, big grin, bright eyes. He took a lot of crap in boot camp and learned to give it back. Drink hard, swear hard, punch a few shoulders to show you're tough. He was a draftee, too, and that didn't help in a platoon full of volunteers. When our medic unit got attached to his group, he started hanging out with us off duty. We drank a lot of that warm Bolivian beer together.

Frank and I weren't really draftees. Frank was premed, as he used to call it. He couldn't afford college, so he

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was getting his training the hard way. He was thin and dark, with blue growth on his chin two minutes after shaving, and he spent a lot of time reading textbooks. I was a CO. I came out of college with an English degree and a choice of immediate employment: war plant, nuke plant, medic, or jail. No Canadian refuge, this war. I took medic, I guess, because I thought somebody had to balance the killing. Anyway, we weren't volunteers, and that suited Billy. We got to be friends, even.

"So Grampa got out whole," Frank said.

"Yeah. Spent the rest of his tour in Germany. Drinking real beer."

"How long was he in 'Nam? Before he got the million-dollar wound, I mean."

"Six months." Billy laughed. "Hell, he was halfway home, anyway, wasn't he? I got eleven months and three days to go, and I haven't even been shot at."

"They had shorter months in 'Nam," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"R and R counted," I told him. "When Gramps went down to Saigon for a week, it was still combat time. He could go for a month to Tahiti and it was still part of the year."

"Shit," Billy threw his can at the box. "Figures the army would nix that one. I gotta spend 365 days on the line."

Frank nodded. "And we've got 730 each."

"With ten sick days," I added.

"Shit. And you guys can't even shoot back."

Patrol was hard work. We were northeast of La Paz, in the foothills near the Mamoré. The terrain was rough and broken, high fields separated by forest and deep ravines. It was hot during the day, cool at night. It rained a lot for weeks and then baked for weeks. The people lived in small houses, raised potatoes, mined copper and tin, and soon enough they started shooting at us. Sometimes it was guerrillas and sometimes it was coke farmers, but the bullets did the same thing. Billy and his unit kept busy shooting back, and Frank and I cleaned up after them.

We were in a quiet area, at least. Short bursts of fire. A few flesh wounds, mostly Band-Aid stuff. One guy tripped, rolled down a hill, and broke his leg. Frank and I slapped on the plaster and carried the dumb ox four miles up to a flat place where a chopper could land.

The first bad one stepped on a blender. That's a spring-mounted trap that closes on your leg and shreds it from the hip down. He screamed, and somebody else shouted "Medic!" and Frank and I went running up to the head of the column. There was a lot of blood and a lot of pain, and the rest of the unit stood around watching with sick looks while four of them held him down and pried the damn

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thing open. Then the sergeant shouted them into a defensive formation, and Frank and I tried to stop the bleeding. Frank got real businesslike, pumping in morphine and plugging holes like it was a plastic dummy in training. He had good hands, Frank. He would have made a good surgeon. I just poured on gel and handed him staples and tried not to throw up.

We developed that into a pattern. Frank played doctor and I played nurse and the unit played soldier. Frank took it real seriously, treated each man like he was the only patient we had. Then the fighting got serious, and two weeks later, with nine months and thirteen days to go, Billy got his million-dollar wound.

Frank was doctoring at the other end of the line, so I hauled my kit over to Billy. What could I say? He was lying there with a dark stain spreading down his pants and a big grin on his face. I cut the cloth away and wiped off the blood. There was a pair of holes in his thigh, the front one small and tidy, the back one big and ragged. But it had missed the bone and the artery and he knew it.

"Gramps would be proud," I told him. "Do you need morphine?" His smile was getting strained.

He nodded. "Might as well celebrate." I pumped him up and sprayed on some gel, and we sent him off with the rest of the wounded.

• • •

Three weeks later he was back, with a Purple Heart and a pair of tiny scars on his leg. No limp, no pain, no Germany. And no more sick days. He had nine months and three days left.

He told us a little bit about it one evening over some beers.

"They took some muscle and skin from my other leg and stuck it in the hole. Then they soaked me in some kind of soup like that shit you guys are always spraying around and shined these big blue lights on my leg."

Frank was real interested. "What did they give you to eat?"

"Mostly crap. And pills. All the time pills. But no morphine. Not even aspirin. Bastards."

"Did they use massage?"

"Shit no. They made me lift weights with my foot."

"What did it feel like under the lights?"

"Hot, I guess." He took another drink. "Mostly it just hurt. Can't feel a damn thing now, though," He rubbed his leg as though he wanted it to hurt. "Shit, it's like it never happened."

I handed him another can. "Looks like you'll have to go for the two-million-dollar wound."

He laughed sharply. "Right. Next time I'll ask the pedros to blow my whole leg off. Then the army can send me home to grow a new one."

We all laughed a little and started making jokes about the wrong size

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leg, and what else they could grow back. It wasn't all that funny, but all we could do about it was laugh. The soldier who'd stepped on the blender came back a little later, too, and more of the wounded. The once-wounded. They went back out on patrol and they were a lot more careful. And Frank and I got to work on some of them again.

Billy took his second hit about a month later. Just shy of seven months to go. I remember because Frank and I had scraped the big red crosses off our helmets the night before. Frank started carrying a rifle about then, too. The guerrillas had started shooting medics. Maybe they recognized all the rebuilt GIs and thought we were doing the fixing. What did we know? We just poured on gel, pumped them up, and tried to keep them alive until the chopper came.

We had moved farther to the northeast, still near the river, where the hills were less rugged and ravines more forested. We started using napalm on the guerrillas, too, and they started using it back. Probably our own stuff. They didn't have planes and choppers to drop it from, so they canned it and lobbed it in with skeet throwers. The guys called them Frisbees. If you were good, you could hit them in the air, but they splattered fire on anything underneath. If you let them hit, they burned less territory.

Billy was at the front of the line—God knows why, because he never volunteered for that kind of duty. The pedros were above us and started firing down on the trail. Luckily, they started shooting as soon as they saw the lead man. Lucky for the rest of us, at least. Billy hit the bushes and started firing back, while the rest of us went into the trees and gave cover. Then they lobbed in the napalm. Two Frisbees, maybe three, they put a pool of fire right on Billy. We heard him screaming, and then he came running out, the right side of his body and both boots on fire.

You can't stamp out napalm. It sticks to you. We had special blankets and a spray that foamed, and we smothered Billy as fast as we could. His clothes saved most of him from real damage, but his hands weren't covered, and neither was his face. His right hand was charred to the bone, and three fingers gone. His right cheek started to flake away, and the ear, too, and he had third-degree burns from his neck up into his hair. When we took his helmet off, part of his scalp came with it. There wasn't much we could do but give him morphine, cover him with gel, and get him out fast. He kept his eyes shut — they were both still there, thank God — and held his left hand in a fist up under his mouth, muttering to himself and crying. I thought he was praying at first, but he got louder whenever we jolted the stretcher or touched him. I could hear him moan-

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ing, "Oh Shit, oh shit, oh shit." over and over again. Even Frank was shaken.

Billy was back in three months, with new pink skin, and a hand that clicked a little when he moved his thumb in a certain way, and white hair in a patch on the right side of his head. And he still had seven months to go. He never talked about the hospital this time, and Frank didn't ask him. We shared a lot more beer and a bottle of vodka Billy had smuggled back, and talked about sports and video and women and everything but war. But Billy kept rubbing his hand through the patch of soft white hair and clicking his thumb.

And finally, after one long time of silence and clicking and Frank turning pages, he seemed to notice his thumb. He stared at his hand curiously and said, "What do you think they can't fix? I mean, what if the suckers had burned off both my legs and my balls, too? Would I be stuck in a wheelchair for the rest of my life? Or would I walk around clicking, with a little pump in my pocket for getting it up?"

"I don't know," Frank said. "We've seen a lot of guys come back."

"So who doesn't come back? I mean, what the hell does it take to get out of this?" I shook my head and offered him the bottle, but he didn't see it. He answered himself. "I'll tell you what — you gotta be a goddamn vegetable, that's what. I mean, you really gotta be maimed. 'Cause they sure aren't gonna let a little mechanical damage get in the way. I mean, shit, that's just a little pain. Just kiss it, make it better." Then he took the bottle. Later that night, Frank and I had to put him to bed.

Billy was real careful for three months. He walked slowly, in camp and on patrol. His eyes moved left to right all the time, scanning. He got thin. Frank and I watched him go from being tense to being scared. It became part of him. He talked and moved and even told jokes scared. He acted calm, but it was fatalism.

Anyway, it was Frank who got hit next, just a month after Billy got back. It was a dumb thing, even for a war. The unit had a bunch of pedros pinned down in a farmhouse, waiting for a chopper to come up and douse them. We were back a ways in some trees tending the casualties. I was putting Band-Aids on a couple of guys who'd gotten nicked, and Frank was trying to stop all the blood from running out of another guy who'd been gut-shot. Suddenly somebody was shooting at us. The two walking wounded started shooting back, and things got real hot.

There wasn't much I could do, so I crawled over to Frank and started working on the other guy with him. Frank kept his usual calm, plugging and stapling, and we were making headway on his stomach when the pedros shot him in the leg. The GI

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was past feeling, but Frank got mad. He handed me the stapler and picked up his gun and started shooting back.

The extra firepower seemed to help, because it got real quiet. Then four pedros came out of the woods with bayonets and knives. They got one of the GIs before he even heard them, but Frank and the other guy started firing. Two of them went down right then, but the other two took out the second GI and kept coming. Frank kept pulling the trigger and they kept coming, but then one dropped and the last one made a flying lunge and ended up on his face at Frank's feet with the top of his head open. And his gun sticking up out of Frank's foot. The bayonet went straight through six inches into the dirt.

Frank looked down at his foot and up at me. He put down his own gun, wiped his face, and pulled the other gun up out of his foot. Then he sat down and started treating himself for shock. I carried his kit over to him.

"You know," he said. "That was really dumb."

I didn't know if he meant the pedros or his foot. I went over to the first GI and started patching. Billy and some of the other guys showed up just then, and I felt a little better. Billy knelt by Frank and helped him cut the boot away. They took a look at the foot, and Billy squeezed his shoulder.

"You'll be back in a month, Frank," he said.

It was only three weeks. Frank said they were getting better at it. He also said there was one thing they hadn't worked out. Anesthetic. They couldn't give you too much, because it slowed the healing. It was a long three weeks for him.

He smuggled in some more vodka, though, and brought some news from the States.

"No more draft," he told us.

"You're shitting me," Billy said. He clicked his thumb, a nervous habit now.

"No. They say they don't need it anymore. The volunteers are enough."

"They can't be getting that many," I said. Half my graduating class had been against the war.

Frank shook his head. "They don't need as many," he said. "All they have to do is keep the old ones running."

"You sound like a mechanic."

"They gave me a tour of the surgery. They move 'em in, they move 'em out. There's not much they can't fix."

Billy nodded, his eyes hard. Then he had a thought, and he smiled. It looked strange after all that time. "Wait a minute," he said. "What about us suckers that got drafted already? They're gonna have to send us home, aren't they?"

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Frank laughed. "Don't bet on it, Billy boy. You've got miles of tread left." He laughed again, but it was pretty flat.

One thing I learned from Frank getting shot: As far as they were concerned, I was a gringo and I had no right to be there. I agreed with them, but I wasn't leaving in a box if I could help it. Nonviolence doesn't preclude self-defense, not when the guy who wants to kill you won't stop to hear your side of it. That's what I told myself, at least. I picked up a .45 in exchange for some pure grain alcohol, practiced a few hours, and started carrying it on patrol. It made me feel a little safer. And it wasn't as blatant as a rifle.

Meanwhile, Billy let his hopes get up about going home. The news came about the draft, and he started waiting for the word. He was still waiting a month later when the pedros got him again.

It was short and dirty, a quick burst of fire from the bushes. Then the pedros took off. The squad went after them and left Frank and me with Billy in the middle of the trail. It was a bad wound. They'd opened his stomach with a shredder and left it and half his intestines lying out on the ground with hundreds of little needles stuck in them. Billy was conscious, beyond pain, watching the organs move as though they were the most interesting thing in the world.

I called for a chopper. Then we clamped the big veins and arteries, pulled out all the needles we could see, poured in some gel, and poured the entrails in with it to move him. Billy stayed awake, watching, and finally I had to walk up the trail to get away from his eyes.

When I looked back, Frank had his rifle up against Billy head.

I shouted "Frank!" and ran back toward him. He looked up at me and I stopped, kicking up dust that drifted over him and Billy. "Frank, what the hell are you doing?" He looked down at Billy and then back at me. He kept the gun aimed at the white patch in Billy's hair. "Frank?"

He cleared his throat and I waited, sweating. The sun glared. Finally he said. "He asked me to do it."

I looked at Billy. His eyes were closed. "And you were going to?"

He nodded.

"That's murder."

He laughed. "You can't murder a dead man."

"He's not dead." He wasn't. I could see him breathing.

Frank shrugged. "Brain death. That's the only thing that will kill him. That's why he asked me."

"Frank, a doctor's got to save lives, not take them. You don't have the right to make that decision."

"How many times do I have to save them?" But he put down his gun.

The chopper came and took Billy away, and we went back to base. The next day the Major called me in on

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the floor to ask what had happened out there. Apparently Frank had come in yelling about zombies and throwing his textbooks at anyone with brass. Somewhere in there he threatened to shoot every wounded soldier on the front. They sent him off, and I heard later that they had him in an institution Stateside. Mentally incompetent. I stayed in the woods with the squad, and eventually Billy came back.

He was down to four months, but he looked like he wasn't going to make it. They all looked like that now, even the lucky ones who'd never been hit. Hell, most of them were volunteers. They'd come in ready to give their lives for their country. Well, they'd done that. And then some.

Two weeks later Billy got it again, another gut wound. I plugged up the holes in his new stomach and looked at the piece of Teflon tubing or whatever it was that ran out of it. My own stomach twisted. The plastic was worse than blood.

His eyes were closed, and he was breathing unevenly. I'd done all I could with my kit, so I took his hand and held it. I thought he was out, but he opened his eyes and looked at me. He squeezed my hand, and I felt his thumb click in my palm.

"How many times are you going to let them kill me?" he said.

Then he went out for good. I checked for a pulse, but it was gone. I closed his eyes and sat back on my heels and thought about how many times I'd sent him off on the chopper. And how many times he'd come back. And then I remembered that he still had three months and two weeks to go.

That's when I took out the .45 and shot him in the head. It's a big bullet, big enough to break your arm with a near miss. No one asked any questions.

I waited for him to come back. I waited three months before I began to believe that Frank was right. And I began to see more head wounds, always in the worst guys, the guys like Billy who'd been hit the most. The guys who had close buddies who'd help them out. Getting out was all they talked about anymore. I did it for one other GI. Like Billy, he asked me to.

And I got a letter from Frank, with a clipping about a peace rally. He was out of the institution and working for some vet agency, writing letters to Congress and to newspapers. He said it was hard, because there was no draft so there was no pressure on anyone at home to save their own butts. But he said it was working. They were going to change things.

I hope to God he's right. I hope they change the regs tomorrow, or end the war so these guys really could get out. Frank's the kind of guy who could make it happen.

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Me, I'll do what I can here. I've still got six months to go — six real months. I figure I could still help out a lot of these guys. And you do help out. When they ask you, you do it. They've got a name for it now. They call it the million-dollar wound.

"In the on-going struggle for men's souls, I think you should be aware that heaven doesn't have a piano bar."

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The story of an addict on Christmas Eve 2020, when the crackdown on drugs has not worked — or has it. . .?

Addrict

BY

AVRAM DAVIDSON and GRANIA DAVIS

Here's S. Claus on Santa's new modelry, one-person, one-photon-unit skimmer. Well, it *was* new . . . when the twenty-first century was new. Well, it *works,* doesn't it? Even though my hands are shaking so much.

It's Christmas Eve, year 2020, but I don't *care* — don't care about ho ho humbug and deck the halls-balls. Only one thing I care about — same thing I care about every day of the year. And every night, too. Price is up — keeps *going* up. Every day the costry is higher, and my dealer just laughs when I complain. "So strike the habit," she says. But I *can't* strike the habitry. *She* knows it. *I* know. It.

Everyone knows it. My mangley family and their loving lectures. "Try. Just *try* to go without it for one day," my everlovring used to say. "If you can manage for one day, you can strike it."

Yeah. Sure. How cold is *your* turkey?

But I never got through even one day without getting the jitters and shakes so bad I just had to have it.

I must have it.

And my mangle-mouth bossry: "We've tried to be lenient and understanding, as the Sympathy Law requires, but you just aren't carrying your own psychic weight around here. Better smarten out."

Better thisry, better thatry.

Hard to carry your own psychic weight when you're shaking and twitching, can't think or concentrate. Can't think about anything except *getting* it . . . *getting* it . . . needing it . . . *needing* it . . . *so. Bad.* I used to be an outstanding empathetic, spousery, model employee — until the craving got so bad.

It's *like* that when you're snared.

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People can honey-talk you and para-empathry you and try to persuade you to quit, but deepry downry you don't give a cram about *any* of them . . . everlovring . . . bossry . . . mother . . . best friend . . . affinitry. . . . They mean nothing compared to *it. Itry. Gotta* have it — *now.*

—Sell my share in a Moon Condo, if I had one to sell. Oh, there's plenty of ways to get it. Don't *need* a job-bob, don't *need* family, friends, para-empathry, share in a Moon Condo. *Zucks,* just need some *bucks.* A big wadry of bucks, mintage, *cooky.* Price goes up every day, but I don't care. I'll cut the cooky somehow. Sell my bod-hod. Gongle something. *Lift* something. Getting *good* at lifting. Only snagged once, invoked the Sympathy Law. Nothing on the record; getting *good* at lifting. Well . . . was. Hard when your hands shake-snake. Can still drive the skimmer, though; never touch the ground.

Tonight? *Easy.* Christmas *Eve.* All those packages of costly new merch so nicely wrapped in color-spang and sitting around oh so visibly. Around the gaily decorated tree-bee. Just skim around the right poshry neighborhood dressed in my Santa suit, and my Santa beard and my Santa bag. *Bag*-hag. Just slip inside an unlocked door or gongle open a window that's hidden from the street. Just climb over a force-fence, gongle open a lockry. Getting better at this all the time *ho* ho ho; tricks of the trade-raid. Tricks of the trade. Never carry a gunry, ho ho *no!* Penalty too *stiff* now. Instant death, what could be stiffer? Knife will do if someone bothers me. If there's trouble.

But I'm not after trouble-bubble. After something *else.* I just *need* it —*soon.*

A poshry house where nobody's home? That's easy. Tonight. *Ev*eryone has skimmed off to church, or parties, or family dinner-spinner. Plenty of houses empty tonight — and they all have those big green *trees* — surrounded by unopened, unused, ex*pen*sive things. *Salable* thing-wings.

I went to church when I was younger, before I got snared. *I* went to parties and family dinners. *Em*pathy! Now I go to church only to lift the collection, sly-fly. Or get a free meal. Family and friends don't invite *me* anymore. Don't like to see me twitching and shaking and visibly craving itry.

Fence said he'd be around all night. Right. This is a *big night. Zucks,* all those empty *hous*es! All that valuable new *merch,* color-spang-wrapped *merch*andise sitting around those *trees.*

Gonna make a *good* haul tonight. Gonna carry off a bunch of lootry in my Santa bag. Gonna sell it fast to my mangley fence. He'll cheat me as usual, but I don't care, I'll have so much stuffry. Jewelry, maybe. Photon-unitry, microcomputers, maybe. Real wool sweaters (getting rare-bear); port-

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able 3-D video, silverware, maybe. I'll have *ev*erything. Fence will sure peel off a wadry of bucks, mucho cooky, and then I'll hustle-bustle right over to my sweet *deal*er—

"It's *Christ*mas!" is what I'll say. "Ho ho *ho*! Gift me with a free sample, dealy-feely!"

Oh, she'll gripe, she'll snaggle, but she'll give. Hands will stop shaking, then. I'll feel so much better. I'll *bar*gain with her over price-nice. Tonight is an easy night, she'll be feeling goodry. *Em*pathy. Me in my Santa suit . . . I'll buy *big*. Maybe enough to last till New Year. *Zucks!*

But—

Gotta be *care*ful. Can't get *caught*. get caught in one of those big richry houses. Can't get caught with my lootry, they'll *take* it — leave me with nothing — nothing but shaking hands.

Can't ever get caught.

This neighborhood looks plush. Looks poshry. Plenty of rich mangleheads live here. *Lotsa* good stuff around *their* trees. Think I'll try *this* big house-mouse. No skimmers hanging in the skimway. Lights are dim. Just enough so the house looks occupied — not to *me, I* can't be fooled. Done this too many times. *This* house is *empty*. People skimmed off to church or a family din-din party. Fa la la la and silent night to *you,* folks, whoever you are — you're about to help a poor addrict with shaking hands and a big need-feed.

House all decorated for the holidays — strings of lights and a big wreath. *Real* holly. Jolly. Almost as rare as real wool, costs a wad for that stuff nowadays. *Rich* folks. Deserve to treat themselves right, all that cooky. *Presents!* Maybe jewelry, silverware, mini-video, photon-units, *all* kinds of goodies. Now I'm going to redistribute the wealthry a bit. Modern Robin Hood, taking from the rich and giving to the poor mangle-heads — *me.* I'm the poor mangle-head with shaking hands. Gotta have it — *soon.*

Little window at ground level back here on side. Lightweight glom-locks on these things. Easy to gongle it open and crawl inside. *No* sign of a zeeper alarm. O.K. now, just push a little harder, a lit-tle —'kay. Snapped-zapped. Window yielding easy. Easy, baby, easy. *In*side.

Nice house. Real richry. Good furniture, big 3-D video. Just skim around a little. Just check out the drawers, the closets, other likely hidey places for cashry or jewelry or silver. Then hit the presents — stacks of them around a big tree-bee, a *real* one, all decorated with silver icicles and angels. My mother used to put angels on our tree — but I haven't seen *her* in *years*. Cheers. Not since she found out who'd been robbing her. And *why*. And — empathy. Forget.

Oh. What's *that?* A noise. Probably just a cat-rat, or I'm getting spooky. (*Soon,* baby, *soon.*) Sounds like footsteps. Am I imagining things? Withdrawal hallucinations? Oh, God, it's

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n old lady! A frail, wrinkled little old ady with thin white hair and a uarter-unit walker and a frilly night-own, maybe the last one in the *world.* eminds me of my—

Why aren't you at *church,* you old vitch-bitch! Why aren't you at the ig family dinner? Don't you like par-ies and eggnogry, hey, oldbitch-vitch? What are you *do*ing out here n the living room? If you were too ick for church or party or dinner, hen aren't you too sick to be wan-ering around the house by yourself -especially nowadays when there's o many prowlers about, the mangley onglers. Go back to your *room,* old-itch! *I'll* stay out. *I* won't bother ou. Did you hear a noise? It wasn't ie. It wasn't a burglar in a Santa suit ith shaking hands. It was only a cat-at. You don't *have* a cat? Well, maybe *was* a burglar, but what can *you* do, ith your thin white hair and deep rinkles, your frilly nightgown and our quarter-unit walker? I could snap ou in *two* oldbitch-witch. I could *ngle* you! Go back to your *room!*

Zots, she *sees* me. Can I calm her own with a ho ho ho routine? No. e's starting to scream-dream. Thin, ysterical, *use*less screams. Heading r the vidi-phone. What to *do?* The py — the fence — the dealer-feeler.

Oldbitch put that *phone* down! ut . . . it . . . *down* . . . . See, I've got a ife-life . . . my hands are shaking. . . . ut it *down.* Stop *scream*ing. You und like my—

Now she's stopped. She's down on the floor. She'll be quiet soon. Should have kept your *mouth* shut, oldbitch. Should've stayed away from that vidi-phone. You've had a long life — and a comfry one, too — *look* at all this plushry furniture, big 3-D video, all these unopened packages of color-spang-wrapped merch. Were gonna die soon anyway. Why bother to live if you can't even go to church or the big family dinner-spinner on Christmas Eve?

Stop shaking, hands. Stop *shak*ing. Gonna pour myself a drink-think — expensive? You bet; *scotch.* Plenty deary in this year 2020, like real wool, real holly, real — Merry Christmas, oldbitch. Can't stay too *long.* Sorry.

Quick; find some jewelry, find some silvery, find some micro-appliances. Open these packages, open this merch, take the *good* stuff, the stuff I can sell to my fence.

—A purse. Must be the old lady's purse. Money out of her wallet. I.D./Credit, can always get bucks for I.D./Credits, even hers, so old-mold. Take her gold cross and chain, too. (Got to *have* it . . . *soon!)* Heavy. *Real* gold, no snytha-chem.

Zucks!

What *else* have we got? Hey, here's the jewelry box with pearls and gold chains, rings and opal earrings, *lots* of nice stuff-puff. Good taste. Fine people here. *Fine.* Mine.

Presents. Wow, holo-camera, for

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me? Oh, thank you, Santa! A real wool sweater? They're so expensive now! And this jade bracelet? For *me*? Whee. No. For my fence. Gotta hurry. Gotta—

Soon, baby, *soon.* Hands'll stop shaking, *soon.*

Hurry. Dining room. Sniff around. In the sideboard; what? The family silvery, is what. Sterling. Good taste? The *best!*

Just toss it all into my Santa bag. Adjust my Santa beard. Hey, this could be lotsa *fun!* Well . . . coulda *been.* If oldbitch hadn't gotten in my way. If my hands weren't *sha*king so. If I didn't need *it* so much. Well. *Out* the window. Bye, folks. Jokes. Thanks for everything . . . and . . . Merry Christmas!

Just walk down the streetry in my Santa coat and my Santa beard, with my Santa sack bulging with gifts —for my fence? Oh — yeah — but for *me,* too. Here's my skimmer. Oldry but goodry. Onto the metro and away we *go.* Ho. A big fat haul, undetected, and I'm feeling *good* now. Pow. Gonna unload all this rich stuff. Gonna collect my wad from my fence. Gonna rush right over to my dealer for some Christmas *cheer.* Hear? Gonna feel *fine.*

(*Soon*, baby. *Soon.*)

—Kinda rundown neighborhood. Fence doesn't live in such a poshry house as the poor oldbitch. Gotta be more careful around here. Lotta tough types-hypes. Keep my fingers on my knifery. Feels so cool and reassuring in my sweaty fingers. So — What is it?

Oh, God, it's a setup. An unmarked copskimmer! Staking out my fence's old shack; his living low doesn't fool *them*! Waiting for a bit of business to show up! They found me. They're after me. Gotta *run*-fun. Gotta *hide!*

No, baby. Stay cool-cruel. Just skim along at legal speed, skim around the block. No one will suspect ho ho old Santa, heading home to delight his family. 'Kay. Go, go, *go* —So.

Stay cool. Don't shake so hard. They following? Not a sign. Didn't even *see* me. Didn't even *no*tice. Calm down now. No shakery. What to *do*? Ah. *Ah!* Unload the stuffry on my dealer-feeler! Sometimes she'll take merch instead of cash. This is costry stuffry. Holo-camera, silvery, jade bracelet, microcomputer, pearls, gold chain and cross from old — won't mention that part-heart. Dealy will give me a mangley price; always *does* — but gotta un*load* this stuff. Gotta get it *soon.*

Used to be legal long ago-so. Yeah used to be able to buy it openly. Still more-or-less legal in some countries I heard. Not *here.* Not any *more*-sore. Cracking down *heavy.* Growing. Selling. Using. Stiff sentences now. Pow. They say it's bad — but it's worse if you can't get *it.*

Heavy robo-sensor border patrols confiscating huge amounts from attempted smuggles. Shouldn't snag the poor smugglers. should give them a

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medal. They're doing a public service-nervous, supplying poor addricts like me. Shouldn't put them in *jail*-wail. *They* take it . . . and probably use it themselves. Drives the prices up and *up*. Used to be legal. Long ago. (*Soon,* baby. *Soon!)*

Almost there. Fence and dealer not very far apart. Here's her house, and there's no cops-bops, no cop cars. The lights are on, and I hear music — she's home-poem!

"Hey, dealy! Look at me — It's *San*-ta bringing lots of good *pres*ents for you. Take it all. *Yours.* Merry Christ-mas! Just let me have a decent stashry of it. My hands are shaking so *bad* I can't *stop*-pop.

"What, dealy? My fence? Cops' stakeout, so —No, nobody followed. I got *such* a good haul! (Never mind oldbitch bleeding on the rug-bug, not a word of that.) Lotsa nice Christ-mas toys I knew you'd love. Jade bra-celet, silvery, holo-camera, pearls, microcomputer, real wool sweater. *Good* stuff-puff. Ex*pen*sive. Mostly brand-new, never used. You can get a wad for it. Could wait, sell it myself, but kind of in a *hurry.* Hands shaking— *You* know. Feel *gongled. You* know — you've had the shakes-snakes. Hey, how about a free sample, dealy? It's *Christ*mas — so how about some Christmas *cheer?*

"No, hey? Down to business, hey? Well, *look* at what I brought you. Just give me a decent stashry and you can have it *all. Look!* Opal earrings, holo-camera, microcomputer, real wool sweater. O.K., cute? Cutery? (Hands shaking so *bad*-sad, gotta have it *soon* . . .)

"One? That's all you'll give me is one? Cutery, look, I brought you so much good stuff; worth at least *five*-jive. Camera, computer, sweater, bra-celet, silver, gold chain, cross. Look. *Look* at all this stuff, worth at least five, maybe six, seven—

"Things are tightry now, huh? Can't let me have more than *two*? That's your final offer? Well, O.K., baby. I'm flexible. I understand. *Zucks! (I need* it now!) Maybe next time you'll gift me some samples, but I'll take two now. Pow.

(*Soon.* Hands'll stop—)

"You know it used to be legal. Long ago. Sure, when I was younger you could buy it in any supermarket — what's *tak*ing you so long? —Then they said it wasn't healthry, but I nev-er could strike the habitry. So guess I'm hooked-cooked. Ah . . . . *Here—*

"My two jars of instrant coffree!"

"Gotta cup-pup?"

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Robert F. Young died in the summer of 1986. He was born in 1915; after serving with the military police in WW II, he returned to Silver Creek, NY on Lake Erie. His varied and distinctive fiction appeared here for more than 30 years, and this will not be his last story. We have one other that he sent shortly before his death, and his wife writes that the day before he died, he was working on another story.

What Bleak Land

BY

ROBERT F. YOUNG

This morning I got a phone call from the contractor I hired to build our new house. He said his men had dug up a box while leveling the hilltop where the house is going to stand. It was a brass box, he said, and its lid had been soldered in place. Since it might contain something of value, he thought I should be there when they opened it. I told him I would drive out.

That's one of the advantages of being retired. You can do anything you want to whenever you please. It's also one of the disadvantages. You have too much time to do things, and more often than not, there's nothing to do.

I have not been retired very long. Only six months, in fact. Most people who live in this section of the country move to Florida to spend their "golden years." I am not one of them. Years ago when my sister and I sold the land our father left us, I saved the highest hill. It's a lovely hill from which you can see the lowlands and the lake, with maples and oaks and locusts growing on its slopes. I've hung on to it all this time, and now, having hung up my fiddle and my bow, I'm going to live on its crest.

I've never gone very far from the hill. The farthest was during WWII when the army, trying to make maximum use of my services, moved me here and there in the States and finally shipped me overseas. After the war I went to work for Houdaille Industries and moved to the city to be near my job and bought a house there. But the hill is where I'm going to live now, as soon as the house is built. I and my wife, Clair. We have no ties: our children long ago grew up and got

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married and moved away. In the summer the land below us will be pied with daisies and Queen Anne's lace. In fall there will be goldenrod and mayweeds and asters. In winter there will be snow. I may stagnate in my later years, but it will not be from an endless succession of hot, bright, dreary days that have but a single face.

I asked Clair if she wanted to drive out to the hill with me. She said no, she had shopping to do. I took the throughway and got off an hour later at the Fairsburg exit. I drove through the little town, fighting off memories. The hill is only a mile beyond. I drove past the housing development that now occupies part of the land my father used to own. The hill rose before me, like a green and earthbound cloud.

The contractor's heavy equipment had made a road of sorts up the slope, but I refused to jeopardize the undercarriage of my Caprice and got out and made my way skyward through the maples and oaks and locusts. The July sun beat down through the foliage and was hot upon my back, and I was sweating when at last I reached the crest.

A bulldozer was churning back and forth, leveling recalcitrant humps and filling in hollows. Bill Simms, the contractor, was standing by his pickup, talking to a big, burly man. Two other men were working on the motor of a backhoe. Simms walked over to meet me. "Glad you could come, Mr. Bentley. I guess we're as curious about what's in the box as you are." He pointed to a ragged area near the edge of the leveled land. "It's over there."

We walked over the raw earth. The big, burly man followed. Simms said, "This is Chuck Blain, my foreman." We nodded. The two men who had been working on the backhoe motor followed us, too.

The box had been pulled out of the torn earth. Verdigris had turned it green. It had been cast out of brass and was about sixteen inches long, about twelve wide, and about six deep. As Simms had said, the lid had been soldered into place.

I had never seen the box before; nevertheless, it struck a note of déjà vu. I said. "Let's open it and see what the treasure is."

Blain had brought a crowbar. He found a place where the solder hadn't taken, and wedged the pinched end of the bar beneath the lid. He pried down, and the lid broke free. I knelt down and raised it.

When I saw what the box contained, I knew it was Rone's.

Rone was the only name we ever knew him by. If he had a first name, he never said so, and we never asked him. When I first saw him, I took it for granted he was just another bindle

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stiff. He looked like one — tall and gaunt and ragged, his face discolored by coal smoke. My mother thought he was one, too, when she came to the back door in answer to his knock. I was in the backyard, chopping wood.

Lots of bindle stiffs used to come to our door. The Pennsy and the New York Central tracks ran through Fairsburg and skirted our farm (they're the Norfolk and Western, and Conrail tracks now), and when the freight trains stopped at the Pennsy or New York Central station to uncouple or couple cars, the bindle stiffs who rode the rails would sometimes get off outside of town and go around to people's back doors, panhandling. Since they liked to keep a low profile, they usually stuck to the houses on the outskirts, and as our house was well outside of town and close to the tracks, we were sitting ducks.

Whenever one would come to our door, he'd stand there on the back steps holding his little bundle of belongings in one hand (I never saw one who carried his bundle on the end of a stick the way they were sometimes depicted in cartoons), and when my mother would answer his knock, he'd take off his hat and say, "Could you spare a bite to eat, ma'am?" My mother never turned any of them down. She felt sorry for bums. Sometimes some of them would offer to perform some chore in exchange for the handout. More often, though, they'd just walk away.

My mother fixed Rone a sandwich and gave him a glass of milk, and he thanked her and sat down on the back steps. I could tell from the big bites he took and from the way he gulped down the milk that he was half starved. He had no bundle of belongings, and the suit he was wearing, although ragged and dirty, looked as though not long ago it had been new.

It was a warm September day, and I'd just got home from school. It was hot chopping wood, and I spent more time resting than I did swinging the ax. After he finished eating, Rone opened the back door wide enough so he could set the empty glass inside, then he took off his suit coat, came over and took the ax from my hands, and started chopping wood himself. He had a narrow face, kind of a long nose, and gray eyes. I could tell from the way he was swinging the ax that he'd never chopped wood before, but he caught on fast. I just stood to one side and watched.

My mother watched, too, from the back door. He chopped and chopped and chopped. After a while my mother said, "There's no need for you to chop any more. You've more than earned the little bit I gave you to eat."

"That's all right, ma'am," Rone said, and set up another chunk of wood.

My father, who'd driven into town for chicken feed, pulled into the yard

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and backed the old beat-up truck he'd bought for twenty-five dollars up to the barn door. I helped him unload the two bags of feed. He was a tall, lanky man, but he was twice as strong as he looked and didn't need my help. But he pretended that he did.

He looked over at Rone. "He chop all that wood?"

"I chopped some of it," I said.

"Your mother feed him?"

"She gave him a sandwich and a glass of milk."

We went into the house. My mother had just finished paring potatoes, and now she put them on to boil. She did all her cooking on a wood stove. "Hell," my father said, "maybe we should ask him to stay to supper, too."

"I'll put on another plate."

"You go out and tell him, Tim. And take that damned ax away from him."

So I went out and told him and stood in front of him so he couldn't chop any more wood. He leaned the ax against the woodpile. His eyes made me think of somber winter skies. "My name is Rone," he said.

"I'm Tim. I go to school. I'm in sixth grade."

"Oh."

His hair — what I could see of it below the edges of his cap — was brown. It needed cutting. "I wonder if I could wash my hands." He talked kind of slow, as though measuring each word.

I showed him where the outdoor faucet was. He washed his hands, and his face, too, and took off his cap and combed his hair with a comb he found in one of his shirt pockets. He needed a shave, but there was nothing he could do about that.

He put his suit coat back on and stuffed his cap into one of its pockets. I saw that he was looking over my shoulder. "Is that your sister?"

A new Model A had stopped in the road, and Julie had gotten out and was coming across the yard. The Model A drove away. Julie's girlfriend was Amy Wilkens, and often after school she used to stop at Amy's house instead of walking home with me, and sometimes Amy's father would drive her home. He worked in the post office. We always thought the Wilkenses were rich. Compared to us, they were.

"How did you know she's my sister?" I asked Rone.

"She looks like you."

Julie glanced at him as she walked by. His presence didn't disconcert her in the least, because she was used to bindle stiffs. She was only nine years old and real skinny, and it made me mad that Rone said she looked like me, because I thought she was homely. I was eleven.

After she went in the house, Rone and I went over and sat on the back steps. Not long afterward my mother called us to supper.

Rone didn't eat like a bindle stiff. I

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guess maybe the sandwich he'd wolfed down and the milk he'd drunk had curbed his appetite, and maybe that was why he didn't grab. We had hamburger patties, and my mother had added water to their juice so we could put it on our potatoes. Rone kept glancing at her. I couldn't see why. To me, she was beautiful, but I took it for granted that this was because she was my mother. She wore her dark brown hair combed back into a little bun on her neck. In winter her skin was milky white, but spring always added a touch of color when she planted her kitchen garden, and summer turned her skin to gold.

Rone had already told her and my father his name. "What part of the country you from?" my father asked.

Rone hesitated for a moment, then said, "From near Omaha."

"Things tough there, too?"

"Kind of."

"I guess they're tough all over."

"Please pass the salt," Julie said.

My mother handed her the shaker. "Would you like some more potatoes, Mr. Rone?"

"No, thank you, ma'am."

Julie looked across the table at him. "Do you ride the rails?"

He didn't seem to know what she meant. "She means, do you ride under the freight cars so the railroad bulls won't see you?" I explained.

"Oh. Yes, I did."

"You know that's none of your business, Julie," my mother said.

"I only wondered."

My mother had baked a coconut cream pie. She served everyone a big piece. Rone took a bite of his. He looked over at her. "May I ask you a question, ma'am?"

"Of course."

"Did you bake this pie in a *wood* stove?" He had seen the stove when we came through the kitchen.

"Well, I guess I must have," my mother said, "since it's the only stove I've got."

"I believe," Rone said, "that one of the main troubles with mankind is that they look for miracles in all the wrong places, while the miracles that are taking place beneath their noses totally escape their attention."

Now who would ever have expected a bindle stiff to say something like that? I guess all of us just sat there and stared at him. And then my mother smiled and said, "Thank you, Mr. Rone. That's the nicest compliment I've ever had."

We finished the meal in silence. Then Rone looked first at my mother and then at my father. "I will never forget your kindness." He got up from the table. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I think I'd best be going."

None of us said anything. I guess none of us could think of anything to say. We sat there listening to him walk through the kitchen, and listened to the sound of the back door open and close. Then my mother said, "I guess wandering's in their blood."

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"I guess it is," my father said.

"Well, I'm glad it's not in yours." My mother looked at Julie and me. "Julie, you can help me with the dishes. Tim, I suspect you've got homework to do."

"Only just a little."

"Well, the sooner you get to it, the sooner it'll be done."

I lingered at the table. So did Julie. We liked to keep abreast of things. I heard the rumble of a freight train. I listened for it to slow, but it didn't. The house shook a little as it went by. Maybe the next one would have to pick up or leave cars in Fairsburg, and Rone could catch that.

My father said, "Emma, they're starting to take grapes at the factory Monday, so I'll be going back to work."

"All those long hours again."

"I don't mind."

"Mr. Hendricks said I could pick for him again this year. He's going to start next week."

"Maybe," my father said, "we can get far enough ahead this year to buy you a gas stove."

"We need too many other things, and the kids need clothes."

Fall was always when we had lots of money, with my father working at the grape juice factory and my mother picking grapes. My father worked at the factory during bottling season, too, but bottling season was off and on, and spread out over the year, and at the most he'd work only a total of three months. But we always were able to get by because of the additional money he made raising string beans and corn and tomatoes. The farm wasn't a big one, and most of it was too hilly to work, but what my father raised on the rest of the land was enough to keep us out of the poorhouse. Besides which, we had a cow and chickens.

I tried to linger at the table a little longer, and so did Julie, but it didn't work, for my mother said, "Off to your homework, Tim. Julie, start clearing the table."

Julie and I used to have to walk to school before our father bought his truck. Then he began driving us into town every morning, but he still made us walk home, except in bad weather, saying the exercise would do us good. Before he bought the truck, our only means of transportation was an old Model T that kept breaking down all the time and that my father didn't trust well enough to drive us to school in.

It was Julie's turn to ride by the window the next morning, which was why she was the one to spot Rone. We were halfway between the farm and town when she cried, "Look, Dad — there's a man lying under that tree!"

My father slowed to a crawl and looked out over her head. "Well, he didn't get far, did he?"

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He drove on. Then he put on the brakes and brought the truck to a stop. "Damn it! — we just can't leave him lying there."

After he backed up, all of us got out and went over to the tree. The grass was wet with dew. Rone was lying on his side and he had his cap pulled down over his ears and his coat collar turned up. He was shivering even in his sleep, because the ground was cold.

My father nudged him with his foot, and he awoke and sat up, still shivering. He should have hopped a freight by this time and have been long gone.

My father said, "You planning to stay around these parts?"

Rone nodded. "For a while."

"Do you want to work?"

"I would — if there was any work."

"Well, there is," my father said. "For three or four weeks. This time of year the grape juice factory hires lots of men. They pay thirty cents an hour, and you get lots of hours. It's on the other side of town. Why don't you go there and ask for a job?"

"I will," Rone said.

My father was silent for a few moments. I could tell from the expression on his thin face that he was trying to make up his mind about something. Then he said, "I know you haven't anyplace to stay, so if you want to, you can sleep in the barn till you get your first pay."

"That's — that's kind of you."

"You go back to the farm and tell Emma I said for her to fix you some breakfast. I'll drive you over to the factory after I take the kids to school."

My father was softhearted. Most men would have driven right on by and paid no attention to Rone. I guess his softheartedness was why we were always so poor. Anyway, that was how Rone came to live with us that fall.

Rone didn't have any trouble getting a job. During pressing season the grape juice factory hired anybody who came along. Over the weekend he ate his meals with us and slept nights in the barn, and Monday morning he and my father piled into the truck and went to work. My mother had fixed each of them a lunch and had found another thermos bottle somewhere so Rone could take coffee, too. She had baked a cake Sunday and gave each of them a big piece.

It was after nine that night before they came home. Their faces and arms and hands were stained with grape juice, and their shirts were splotched with it. This was the way my father always came home during pressing season. His job was making "cheese," and he said that this year the superintendent had made Rone his helper. The job paid thirty-five cents an hour instead of only thirty because it was so hard.

I knew all about the job because I used to take my father his lunch on

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Saturdays and sometimes Sundays, and I used to hang around and watch. When the grapes came into the factory, they were dumped from their crates onto a conveyor and sprayed with water as they were borne aloft to the kettles. They were then boiled till they turned into a juicy mixture of skins and stems and pulp. Then the mixture was funneled through thick rubber hoses to the ground floor, and my father or one of the other "cheese" makers would open and close the valve of his hose and fill press blankets that he and his helper spread out successively on flat wooden sheets. Each blanket had to be folded over its contents, and when the "cheeses" were piled high enough, they were put under one of the presses, where the juice was gradually squeezed out. It was no wonder the company paid thirty-five cents an hour instead of only thirty!

Rone and my father had supper in the kitchen. Julie and I stood in the kitchen doorway and watched them eat. They'd washed most of the juice off their faces and arms, but it still stained their hands. My mother had made dried-beef gravy and boiled a lot of potatoes. She had also baked another cake.

After he finished eating, Rone said good night and went to the barn. My father had fixed up a bed for him in the loft, if you can call blankets laid on hay a bed. He had also given Rone one of his razors, and since he and Rone were about the same height and build, a pair of his old work pants and an old shirt.

My mother began picking grapes the next day, so Julie and I had a lot of chores to do when we came home from school. This didn't set well with Julie, because now she couldn't goof off over to Amy's anymore. She had to feed the chickens, and I had to milk the cow. I thought it should have been the other way around, because in my mind, milking cows was a girl's job. But our mother had laid down the rules.

My father and Rone didn't get their first pay for almost two weeks. Rone laid two ten-dollar bills down on the kitchen table when they came home from work that Friday night. "That's for the two weeks I've been here," he said to my mother.

"Well, you aren't going to pay me ten dollars a week for board," my mother said. "Five dollars a week is plenty." She picked up one of the ten-dollar bills. Being in the vineyards had turned her face a deeper gold. Then she picked up the other ten. "You are now paid up for the next two weeks — if you still want to stay."

"But even ten dollars a week's not enough!" Rone objected. "I would have given you more, but I've got to buy some clothes."

"I wouldn't dream of charging you ten dollars."

Rone tried to argue, but my mother

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paid no attention to what he said. Instead, she looked at my father and said, "Ned, since we've got a spare room, why in the world are we making Mr. Rone sleep in the barn?"

"I don't know why."

"It's a real small room," she said to Rone, "and the mattress on the bed is kind of hard. But it'll be better than sleeping in the barn. Tim will show you where it is after supper."

Rone just stood there looking at her. He didn't sit down till she put the meat loaf she'd warmed up in the oven on the table.

After he got through eating, I took him upstairs to his room. It was real small, as my mother had said, and there was nothing in it but a bureau and a bed. He went over and touched the bed. Then he sat down on it. "It's kind of hard, isn't it?" I said.

"No," he said, "it's as soft as eiderdown."

When she got her pay two weeks later for picking grapes, my mother took Julie and me into town Saturday morning and bought us new school clothes. She also bought us overcoats and overshoes. My father was fall plowing, so Rone drove the truck. Pressing season was over, but neither he nor my father had been laid off yet, and they were working five days a week storing away the crates that had been let out to the farmers and all of which had been brought back.

The clothes and the overcoats and the overshoes put a big hole in my mother's pay, and the school tax and the mortgage on the farm had already eaten a big hole in what my father had brought home, so we wound up almost as poor as we had been before.

Once a month my mother would give my father and me a haircut, and while she was at it, she would trim Julie's hair. But picking grapes had thrown her off schedule, and my hair was beginning to creep down over my collar, and my father's was beginning to creep down past his. So I wasn't surprised Sunday afternoon, after she and Julie did the dinner dishes, when she called my father and me into the kitchen and said it was time to shear the two bears.

She placed a chair in the middle of the kitchen floor and got out her scissors and her hand clippers. "You first, Ned," she said, and my father sat down and she covered him up to the neck with an old sheet and pinned it in place. Then she set to work.

At first she used to give us awful haircuts, and the kids in school used to laugh at me. But they stopped laughing before long, because she got so she could cut hair better than a regular barber. My father looked like a new man when she got done.

"You're next, Tim."

After she cut my hair, she trimmed Julie's. Although I always thought Julie was a homely kid, I could never

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stop marveling at her hair. It was the same color as my mother's and, like hers, as soft as silk. It had grown so long this time that my mother had to cut off at least two inches where it hung down past Julie's shoulders.

All this while, Rone had stood in the kitchen doorway watching. The somber winter skies of his eyes had acquired the faintest touch of blue. When my mother finished with Julie, she looked over at him. "You're next, Mr. Rone."

His hair was twice as long as mine had been. My mother always used to say when my hair got that long that I looked like a musician, but she didn't say that to Rone. His hair was wavy, and she cut it so the waves on top still showed. Looking at him after she got through, I couldn't believe he was a bindle stiff.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said when she removed the sheet. And then: "Why don't you go sit down in the living room, and I'll sweep up."

And my mother did. That evening she made fudge, and all of us sat by the radio and listened to Jack Benny and Fred Allen.

Early in November the weather turned nippy. Julie and I began wearing our new overcoats to school. There had been a hard frost, and the last of the leaves were drifting down from the trees. I couldn't wait to see the first snow.

Julie borrowed a book from the school library titled *The Time Machine*. She was always reading books that were too grown-up for her, so I wasn't surprised when she showed *The Time Machine* to Rone one evening and asked him if he'd read it and explain it to her. Somehow I wasn't surprised when he said he'd already read it.

We were sitting in the living room. My mother was darning socks, and my father had dozed off. Julie climbed up on the arm of Rone's chair.

He riffled through the pages of the book. "What Wells did, Julie," he said, "was use the capitalists and laborers of his own age as a sort of springboard. That was how he came up with the Eloi and the Morlocks. You could say he took a class distinction by the horns and spread them farther apart by making the rich richer and the poor poorer. Factory conditions in his day were even more wretched than they are in this country right now. All of the factories, of course, weren't underground, but enough of them were to give him the idea of putting *all* of them underground."

"But he turned the laborers into *cannibals!*"

Rone smiled and said, "I guess in that respect he went a little too far. But he wasn't really trying to predict the future, Julie. His main reason for writing the book was to attract attention to what was happening in the present."

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"What do you think the future really will be like, Mr. Rone?" my mother asked.

Rone was silent for some time. Then: "Well, ma'am, were you and I to predict the future with any degree of accuracy, we would first have to forget the word *extrapolation.* We can postulate wars, yes — there will always be wars. But otherwise, too many unpredictable factors will enter into the equation for us to take what we know now and predict tomorrow on the basis of those facts alone."

"What factors do you think might enter in?"

Again Rone was silent. Then: "You, your husband, and Tim and Julie sit here in this room, a family of four. And I, an outsider, have temporarily become part of it. Family life is almost indivisible from the present-day scheme of things. Were we to try to predict the future with that fact alone in mind, we would predict one in which family life remained intact. But suppose forces of which people have no inkling today were to manifest themselves and weaken the patriarchal-matriarchal harmony that holds this and other families together? Were to weaken it to such an extent that families were to fall apart? In *The Time Machine,* Wells accredits the disintegration of family life to the disappearance of the dangers that, according to him, made it a necessity. But the appearance of new dangers would more likely be the cause. Suppose, for example, the moral code that people live by today were to atrophy? That new attitudes were to take the place of old? I don't mean to imply that men and women today are saints — far from it. But the fact remains that divorce is uncommon. Part of this can be accredited to the fact that in many instances, people who want to divorce each other can't afford to; but in most instances this isn't true. People remain married to each other because they *want* to. But suppose this Zeitgeist should change? Suppose people began to fancy themselves liberated in a new kind of way? Suppose, as a result of this, divorce became common? More and more children would then be brought up by a single parent and, in the case of remarriages, in two different households. Consider the effect this might have on their attitude toward family life."

"But there's simply nothing in the present on which to base such a prediction!"

"That's what I meant, ma'am, about unpredictable factors entering into the equation. To carry my supposition further, the breaking up of family life could eventually lead to a greater and greater cynicism on the part of both the parents and the children. The construct of marriage might altogether disappear and family life along with it. The state might take over then, and instead of children being brought up by their parents, they

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would be brought up in institutions, their thoughts and actions molded by mentors incapable of love or affection. Family scenes like this one, which you and your husband and Julie and Tim take for granted, might be relegated to the past and all but forgotten about in the new society, or accorded a place in history no more important than the present-day price of eggs."

My mother shivered. "You paint a grim picture, Mr. Rone."

"Yes. It is quite grim. But it isn't something that could happen overnight, and even after the process had been set in motion, it would be a long, long time before the new society came into being."

He handed *The Time Machine* back to Julie. "There's something else I don't understand, Rone," she said. "How did the Time Traveler travel in time?"

Rone smiled. "Wells neglected to tell us, didn't he? He couldn't very well have, since he didn't know. So what he did instead was mislead us with a lot of talk about time being the fourth dimension. Well, in one sense it is, Julie, but in another it may not be. The Time Traveler arrived in the future on the very same spot he'd set out from. But while he was traveling through time, Earth might have rotated beneath him — not much, for he was traveling fast, but a little. For instance, if he'd started out here, he might have arrived in the future five hundred miles west of here. So if he wanted to travel back through time to the same place he'd departed from, he would have to journey five hundred miles to the east, and then an additional five hundred miles in the same direction to compensate for the distance he would lose going back.

"But the complications might not end there. Traveling through time at a terrific rate of speed might very well create an eddy in the time stream, in which case the Time Traveler, before he returned, would have to wait till the time that had passed in the future or the past exactly equalled the time that had passed in the present. But aside from all this, Julie, time travel would be too complex an undertaking for one man to accomplish alone, and a simple time machine like the Time Traveler's simply wouldn't do the trick. If time is tied in with light, what the true time traveler would need would be a photon field whose controls were operated by other men. Using the field, the other men would cast him into the future or the past and, after he equalized the time and space he had lost, would use the field to bring him back."

Most of this went way over my head. I knew it went way over Julie's, too, but she seemed to be satisfied.

Rone got to his feet. "If you folks'll excuse me, I think I'll turn in."

Julie stood up on the seat of the chair and kissed him good night. "Good night, Mr. Rone," my mother

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said, and I said good night, too. My father was still asleep in his chair.

The first snow fell in the middle of November. Julie and I wore our new overshoes to school. Rone borrowed my mother's camera, bought some film, and in the days that followed began taking pictures. Neither he nor my father had been laid off yet, but I knew that soon they would be. I was worried that then Rone would leave, and I knew that Julie was worried, too.

In one of her classes at school, the teacher had all the kids make Thanksgiving cards on which she instructed them to write down what they were most thankful for. Julie brought hers home to show my mother, and my mother showed it to the rest of us. It said:

I am thankful for:
My mother
My father
My brother Timothy
And Rone

On the front of the card, she had drawn a turkey, which looked more like a walrus than a bird, and colored it bright red. My mother hung the card upon the kitchen wall.

My grandparents on both my mother's and my father's side had dinner with us Thanksgiving. They didn't like each other, but my mother was certain that since it was Thanksgiving, they wouldn't get into any arguments. They didn't, but I think that this was because they were united on a common front, rather than because it was Thanksgiving. They disapproved of our letting a bindle stiff live with us; and throughout the meal and afterward, they looked down their noses at Rone.

On Saturday morning of that same week, Mr. Highbee's hardware truck pulled into the yard and backed up to our back door. My mother came out to see what Mr. Highbee wanted. It had snowed all night, a soft, wet snow, and Julie and I were in the backyard building a snowman. My father had gone into town for a bag of flour so my mother could bake bread.

Rone, who had been working on the tractor in the barn, came over to the house. Mr. Highbee climbed out of the truck. He was short and portly. "Good morning, Mr. Rone. I'll need your help to carry it in."

"First," Rone said, "we'll have to carry the old one out. Hold the door open for us, will you, Tim."

I did. They set the wood stove down in the snow, and the snow made it look even blacker than it really was. My mother stood by the back steps, watching. Julie stood beside her.

Mr. Highbee opened the rear doors of the truck. We saw it then. "Hold the door for us, Tim," Rone said.

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They carried it in and set it down on the floor where the old stove had been. Sunlight slanting through the kitchen window bathed it in brightness, and its whiteness threw forth a thousand particles of light. My mother and Julie had followed me inside. Neither of them said a word.

Mr. Highbee went outside and turned the gas off. He brought wrenches and pipes and valves and a pipe threader into the kitchen, and he and Rone connected up the stove. Then Mr. Highbee went back outside and turned the gas back on. He said good-bye to us, and Rone helped him carry his tools back to the truck. We heard the truck drive away. We heard Rone come back in.

My mother was standing by the kitchen table. She hadn't moved in all this time. "It's not meant to be an insinuation that you don't cook well, ma'am," Rone said.

"I know," my mother said.

"That right front burner needs tightening. I'm going out to the barn and get a six-inch crescent."

After he went out the back door, I turned toward my mother. I was going to say, Boy, now I won't have to chop any more wood! But I didn't, because I saw that she was crying.

The following Friday both my father and Rone got laid off. Julie and I came down to breakfast the next morning with long faces. My mother had fixed oatmeal. She didn't look at us when she filled our bowls. My father was standing before the back door, looking through the little window on top.

"Where's Rone?" Julie asked. She was afraid he'd already gone. I was afraid, too.

"He took the truck into town. He had something made at the brass foundry and wanted to pick it up."

"What did he have made?" I asked.

"I don't know. He didn't say."

We never found out what it was, because when Rone came back, he didn't tell us; and whatever it was, he must have hidden it in the barn.

The weekend passed and the new week began, and when Rone said nothing about leaving, we began to think he was going to stay. Then Thursday night he came into the living room and said, "I'm going to be on my way."

For a while none of us said anything. Then my father said, "There's no need for you to go. You can stay with us this winter. As soon as bottling season begins, I'm sure I can get you a job."

"It's not just because I'm not working. There's — there's another reason."

"Are you leaving now?" my mother asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

"But it's snowing."

"No, ma'am. It's stopped."

"We — we wish you would stay."

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"I wish I could." The touch of blueness had vanished from his eyes, but they were no longer the same somber gray they had been before.

A train whistled. The sound seemed to stab right through the house. "I'll fix you some sandwiches to take with you," my mother said.

"No, ma'am. That won't be necessary."

He had his old clothes on. "Your new clothes," my mother said. "Aren't you going to take them with you?"

Rone shook his head. "No — I'm traveling light."

"But the jacket you bought — you've got to take that. You'll freeze in just that coat!"

"No, ma'am. It's not that cold. . . . I want to thank you people for your kindness. I —" He paused. Then he went on, "I — I didn't know there were people like you. I —" He paused again, but this time no more words came.

My father got up and walked across the room and shook hands with him. My mother went over and kissed his cheek. Then she turned her face away.

"You've still got a week's pay coming," my father said. "Can't you give me an address so I can have them send it to you?"

"I signed it over to you."

"I won't take it!"

A smile tiptoed across Rone's lips. "If you don't, you'll only be making the rich richer."

All this while, Julie and I had sat in silence on the couch, unable to move. It was Julie who snapped out of her paralysis first. She ran across the room and jumped up and put her arms around Rone's neck. Then I ran across the room, too. Rone kissed both of us. "Good-bye, you kids," he said.

Julie was crying. But I didn't cry. Not quite. Rone walked out of the room real fast. We heard the back door open. We heard it close. All we could hear then was the sound of Julie's sobs.

For a long time I lay in bed that night listening for a freight to slow as it came into town, but all the freights I heard rumbled right on by. Passenger trains never stopped in town at night, only in the morning. I heard one scream by in my sleep.

In the morning I got up before the sun came up, and after I dressed I put on my new overcoat, because it was cold outside, and my new overshoes. I followed Rone's footprints in the snow. I could see them clearly in the dawn light. He hadn't headed for the tracks; instead, he had struck off across the fields in the direction of town. About a hundred yards from the tree he had slept under, the footprints came to an end.

I stood there in the cold as the first rays of the sun shot over the land. Where the footprints ended, they were side by side, indicating he had come to a stop. Perhaps he had stood there for a while. It looked as

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though the snow around them had begun to melt and then had frozen again.

I thought at first that for some reason he might have jumped several feet ahead and then resumed walking. But the snow beyond the pair of footprints was unmarked. And then I thought, perhaps he walked backward, planting his feet exactly where he had planted them before. But if he had, I would have seen another set of tracks veering to the right or the left, and I had not. Besides, why would he have done such an illogical thing?

Somehow he had vanished in the night.

I stood there for a while longer, then I walked back to the house. I didn't say anything about the footprints to my mother. It was better if she thought Rone had hopped a freight. I never said anything about them to Julie or my father either. Instead, I buried the footprints in my mind, and there they have remained for all these years, and it was not until I looked into the box that I dug them up again.

I took out the album first. On the first page there was a photo of the utterly beautiful woman who had been my mother. Next to it was a photo of a lovely little girl and a little boy with corn-color hair.

Below the photo of my mother was one of the tall, lanky man who had been my father.

On succeeding pages were other pictures of my mother and of Julie and me. There were photos of the house, and there was a photo of the barn. There was one of the snow-covered fields and one of the highest hill.

Beneath the album I found a card with a picture of a walruslike turkey on it. I remembered that it had come up missing from our kitchen wall. I turned it over and read the words again:

I am thankful for:
My mother
My father
My brother Timothy
And Rone

There was a pair of socks my mother had darned for him. I found the razor my father had given him. I came upon a notebook. There was nothing written in it. Instead, flattened between its pages, were two locks of hair. One of the locks was dark brown and as soft as silk. The other was the color of corn.

He must have been robbed when he first arrived. I'm sure they wouldn't have sent him back without specially printed money. Broke, he had had to ride the rails. Then he had had to wait till the eddy he had created in the time stream straightened out; till the time that had passed in the future exactly equalled the time that had passed in the past.

Maybe if we hadn't taken him in, he

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would have starved to death.

He must have had orders not to take anything back to the future with him. And he must have been sent into the past for a reason. Or maybe just to find out what the 1930s were like. The way, perhaps, Armstrong, Aldrin, and Collins were sent to the moon to see what the moon was like.

I looked at the album and the Thanksgiving card. At the razor and the darned socks. At the notebook, which I still held in my hands.

What bleak land did you return to, Rone, that made the memory of us so dear?

I arranged the contents of the box exactly as I had found them and closed the lid. A long freight began rumbling by on the Conrail tracks. "Do you have a soldering iron and solder on your truck?" I asked Simms.

"You want the lid soldered back in place?"

I nodded. He didn't ask why. "I haven't got an iron," he said, "but I've got a small acetylene tank." He turned to one of the backhoe mechanics. "Dick, go get some solder and the tank. It's not heavy."

When Dick came back with the solder and the tank, Chuck Blain took over. It took him only a few minutes to reseal the lid. Then Simms turned to the other backhoe mechanic. "Larry, carry the box down the hill for Mr. Bentley."

"No," I said, I placed the box back into the hole it had been pulled from. *I hope no one disturbs it again, Rone.* I stood up and pointed to the bulldozer. "Tell the operator to bury it," I said.

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In this witty, fast-paced tale of time-travel and necromancy we find out, finally, who really *"wrote Shakespeare." E. Bertrand Loring is related to Grendel Briarton and Bertrand Gironel.*

The Man Who Wrote Shakespeare

BY
E. BERTRAND LORING

Ay, they doe, now name Bretnor, *as before*
They talk'd of Gresham, *and of* Dr.. Fore-man,
Francklin, *and* Fiske, *and* Sauory *(he was in it too)*
But there's not one of these, that ever could
Yet shew a man the Divell, *in true sort.*
They have their christalls, I doe know, and rings,
And virgin parchment, and their dead-mens sculls,
Their rauens wings, their lights, and pentacles,
With characters; *I ha' seen all these.*

(Ben Jonson, *The Devil is an Ass*, ed. William Savage Johnson, N.Y. Henry Holt & Co., 1905. Yale Studies in English, XXXIX.)

There were, of course, a few misguided people who criticized the choice of Professor Ace Mungoos as our first ambassador to our ancestors, arguing that it would have been more appropriate to choose a historian or, at the very worst, the inventor of the Time Machine, Professor Gulnitz, a mere scientist. But consider, who was better qualified? Ace Mungoos was one of the five live-Sponsored Professors at our great Megaloversity of South Central California. His course in Prestige Fashions, English Literature, and Gracious Living had the highest SAR (Student Attention Rating) and SBRR (Student Buying Response Rating) in the entire country. Besides that, he held three separate Ph.D.s and even the much-envied degree of Administrator of Philosophy, and he had almost finished his thesis for the highest degree of all, Administrator of Admini-

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stration. Finally, the title of his thesis, "Did WHO Really Write Shakespeare?" made his selection a certainty.

On the day of his departure, the vast Jane Fonda Memorial auditorium was crammed, for every faculty member, every qualified student, uncounted people from the media, the famous varsity rock orchestra, and even a few oddballs from the physics department were there to watch him disappear and, as promised, reappear exactly half an hour later.

After the reverent silence during the first commercial, the screens announced Professor Mungoos, and the orchestra struck up his theme song, written especially for the occasion: "He's Gonna Nippytuck This Shakespeare Cat, Yea! Yea! Hey, Diddley-Squat!"

The Time Machine itself — an impressive cagelike arrangement of bus bars, gleaming angular bronze helices, and miscellaneous mysterious parts — sat there in mid-stage, buzzing and giving off occasional frightening static discharges. (These were not part of Professor Gulnitz's original design, which was much cruder, but had been added by the school's PR and advertising department, the most progressive in the country.)

As he approached it, despite his shortness of stature Ace Mungoos was indeed an awe-inspiring figure. Researchers in the PR & ad. dept. had garbed him in a costume they averred was de rigueur for the reign of Elizabeth I: slashed doublet and hose, a cleverly magnified codpiece, shiny leather jackboots with high heels, and a romantic plume-bedecked hat over a long, black, curly wig. At his side he wore a piratical cutlass, and in his right hand he carried an ancient copy of Shakespeare's *Complete Works* published by something called the Oxford University Press. To achieve even greater verisimilitude, he had been cleverly made up to look as much like Shakespeare as possible.

He was greeted by tremendous applause, punctuated by enthusiastic wolf whistles at the spectacle of his codpiece, which lasted through to the second commercial.

When it was over, the president of the megaloversity himself, together with the governor of the state and a miscellany of political and academic dignitaries stepped forward to introduce him, praise his accomplishments, and congratulate the PR & ad. dept. on the splendid job it had done. Excitement rose, so much so that a few students actually failed to keep the obligatory silence during an especially effective UID commercial.

Then professor Mungoos spoke. "It has been discovered," he began, sensibly neglecting to mention Professor Gulnitz, who was standing quietly at the machine's switches, "that what we have always believed to be the superstitious and meaningless practices of medieval magic were nothing of the sort—"

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He paused while the media hastily whispered notes into their 'corders.

"—no indeed! We now know, beyond any doubt, that these practices were simply survivals of an ancient science used by men almost as advanced as we ourselves to travel backward and forward to the past and future. That was the purpose of all the incantations, the paraphernalia, the ritual pentacles, tapers, incense. The poor benighted people of past centuries thought that by employing these they could conjure demons! Not at all. All they were doing was creating a nexus of force—"

The screens over his head spelled out N-E-X-U-S, and defined it.

"—a nexus on which the operator of a Time Machine could focus, so that it would receive the Traveler. And that, my dear friends, is what we are going to do here today as soon as I explain my exciting destination and objective to you.

"First, for centuries there has been controversy among the learned as to whether the man known as William Shakespeare actually wrote the plays and poems attributed to him. Some have said Sir Francis Bacon wrote them; others credit Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford; a few are for Queen Elizabeth herself; and so on. My own, much more logical theory is that, while Shakespeare undoubtedly did have a hand in it, he was primarily an administrator — a function far more worthy of his undoubted talents than being a common scribbler.

"Well, we know of a very busy self-declared magician, a contemporary of Shakespeare's. We know exactly where he lived, and our Machine is even now tuned to a moment when he is doing his best to conjure a demon."

Again the screen over his head came to life.

"This," said Professor Mungoos, "is what the British *Dictionary of National Biography* says about him. I'm afraid it is much too long for you to read yourselves, but he called himself a 'professor of the mathematicks and student in physicke in Cow Lane, London,' and we know that he translated a book on the medicinal uses of opium, edited astrological almanacs, and styled himself M.M., or Master of Medicine. It states that he was a notorious character in London and that he was mentioned by several playwrights of the time, Ben Jonson, Thomas Middleton, and so on. For our purposes, all that's important is that we know where his house stood in Cow Lane. And that—" He broke off dramatically, "—is to be my destination on this history-making trip. I have been informed by our scientific associate here that the date of my arrival there can only be approximated, but I'm sure it'll be close enough to A.D. 1600 so that for our practical purposes it will not matter. After all, in exactly half an hour I'll be snapped back to our own time."

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Professor Mungoos's live-in girl friend, Jani Parboyle, was urged forward. She kissed him passionately, expressed her perfect faith in him, and — to the delight of the assembled multitude — tickled his codpiece delicately.

Professor Mungoos stepped into the cage, seated himself on the straight chair it contained, waved airily.

Professor Gulnitz touched a switch. There was a splash of blue electric flame, a mysterious glow that spread eerily and died, and—

Professor Ace Mungoos had disappeared.

His audience settled back to watch the interim entertainment provided by the screens, and to await his return.

They waited a half hour, an hour, Professor Gulnitz pulling and pushing his switches frantically.

Another hour went by and, grumbling to each other, they left the auditorium.

The Time Machine remained unoccupied.

Early in the evening of a too-warm June night in 1588, in the house he and his wife had only recently occupied in Cow Lane, Thomas Bretnor was making his first great effort to summon the Powers of Darkness. The attic room of the narrow three-story house was lighted by several tapers, all compounded of black wax. Five of these surrounded the large pentacle drawn upon the deal floor. A nearby brazier emitted an assortment of stinks, including sulphur, brimstone, a variety of virulent herbs, and whatever else his grimoire called for. A tall, dark cabinet bore what was obviously a dead man's skull, and there were all sorts of ravens' wings and miscellaneous bones scattered round.

Bretnor himself was a tall, thin young man with rather a high forehead, a fair complexion, a thin, assertive nose, and intense gray eyes. Dressed in a gown appropriately decorated with astrological and cabalistic symbols, he was pacing slowly up and down intoning the most impressive words, most of them ending in *-oth, -ael,* and suchlike sounds of power. Occasionally he would pause to make mystic gestures over his pentacle and brazier. The room was hot and humid and full of smokes and stenches, and to tell the truth he was getting a wee bit tired when, on a sudden, the brazier flared up and an abrupt wind blew, hissing and bearing an especially noxious stink.

Bretnor stopped still. He stared.

There, looking somewhat dazed, was Professor Mungoos. Having been projected seated, and having arrived in the same position, he was now sprawled very untidily inside the pentacle.

"God's wounds!" muttered Bretnor to himself. *"I've trapped one!"* He backed to the attic door, opened

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it, pointed his finger at his quarry. "Move not, foul fiend!" he ordered. Then, over his shoulder, "Elizabeth!" he shouted to his wife. "Good Bess, come a-running! I have succeeded! I've caught a demon — not very much of one, I fear, but at least I have him fast!"

"Good day to you, noble s-s-sir," stuttered Professor Mungoos, struggling to sit up and to free the cutlass entangled in his legs. The impact of the scene, of the assorted stenches, the smoke, the heat, and his own disarray had been almost too much for him. "I greet you, famed Thomas Bretnor!"

Here Elizabeth entered, having come a-running, as she had been bidden to. She took one look at the professor, wrinkled her nose, and said, "Well, it's a pretty beauty, isn't it? Why, it doesn't even have a tail!"

"Oh, I daresay it does," replied her husband. "Probably it's tucked up into that great codpiece it's wearing."

She giggled, and Thomas Bretnor suddenly thought of her between the sheets and realized what a trim, pretty little thing she was. But he said severely, "Nay, do not judge it as you might a fellow man, my girl. 'Tis dangerous, for Satan and his fiends are sly indeed, and any shape they take you may be certain is taken to deceive."

Professor Mungoos pushed himself first to all fours, then, with an effort, to his feet. "Kind sir," he pleaded. "I — I'm afraid I have a cramp. May I sit in that chair you have there?"

"Ha!" cried his captor. "What did I tell you, Bess? Already it's trying to trick its way out of the pentacle. Well, fiend, thou shalt not succeed! Do'st take me for some simple peasant conjurer? There I have you, and there you shall remain!"

The professor reminded himself of his four-hundred-year cultural and scientific advantage over even the greatest of Elizabethans. He gathered his faculties, and forced himself to assume an attitude of urbane superiority.

"My dear fellow," he declared, "if you think you have evoked a devil, you are indeed a simple rustic. I am no fiend, no indeed! I am a traveler through time, come here from the distant future, more than four centuries after the reign of your good Queen—"

"It speaks English!" exclaimed Bess. "But how strangely! Tom, could it be a *foreign* demon? Methinks it hath a Spanish look about it!"

"Of course it speaks strangely," agreed her husband, "but that is simply because English is not the native tongue of Hell. Well, we shall listen to its prattle for a moment before we continue on the business I fetched it for. Speak on, fiend!"

Professor Mungoos described the world he came from, the institution where he was held in such high esteem, and the mechanism that had

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brought him. As they remained quiet, he smiled at them and started for the chair himself.

He started — and he advanced exactly eighteen inches. Something invisible but unyielding and impenetrable barred his way.

"What, th' *Devil?"* he snapped involuntarily.

Thomas Bretnor laughed aloud, slapping his knee and embracing his Bess gleefully. "Fiend, there'll be no help from that source for you! Nothing can break through the spells I have erected here. Think again! I brought you here for a purpose, as I'm sure you know, and till that purpose is achieved — till you have brought me gifts of lore and learning, of power or riches — not until then shall I release you to rejoin your Satanic master!"

Apprehensively, Professor Mungoos tried the barrier once again. It held. Suddenly he was nervous. Could there have been more to necromancy than merely providing shuttle service for time travelers? He shook off the idea, comforting himself with the thought that now, in less than half an hour, he would be snapped safely back to the stage of the Fonda Memorial Auditorium.

"I am no fiend." he declared, striving to put sincerity into his voice. "I *really* am no fiend. And I can give you neither the learning of a Faustus, the power of a Temerlane, nor riches— neither diamonds, emeralds, rubies, pearls nor gold have I! I am here on a much grander mission. Do you see this book?"

"Aye," Bretnor answered, "I do see it. And doth it contain secrets that give power over Earth, Air, Fire, and Water? Doth it tell of the Philosopher's Stone or the Universal Solvent?"

"Nothing so crass," answered Professor Mungoos. The heat was getting to him, and he was sweating. "This book contains the complete works of your great countryman, William Shakespeare!"

Bretnor looked at his wife, and she at him.

"Shakespeare?" she echoed. "William Shakespeare? Why, I know one only of the name, a youth only recently up from Stratford, well bred and amiable enough, and lusting to become an actor. Remember, love? We met him at the theater. But, zounds! He is no playwright, not he."

Professor Mungoos began to sweat even more profusely. "Wh-what y-year is this?" he stammered.

"Why, were you not a beastly demon, you'd know well enough," Bretnor told him. " ' Tis the Year of our Lord One Thousand Five Hundred Eighty and Eight, exactly and precisely."

"Good God!"

"Blaspheme not, fiend!"

Professor Mungoos did not even hear him. Virtually felled by the realization that he had arrived two years

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before Shakespeare had written anything, he could not even curse himself for having ignored Professor Gulnitz's warnings of the Time Machine's imprecision. He was gasping like a fish out of water.

"And that wreched book is all that you brought with you?" Bretnor demanded.

"Y-y-yes, all!"

"Then give it here that I may judge it!"

Professor Mungoos told himself that each moment now was precious, that he was buying the seconds, the long minutes before his rescue.

Bretnor, in a deep voice, uttered a strong protective spell, stepped up to the pentacle, took the blue volume from a trembling hand. He walked over to the chair, sat down. Bess came and looked over his shoulder. He leafed through the book. "Well, well," he said. *"The Comedie of Errors. A Midsummer Night's Dream. The Tragedie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark.* All that sounds well enough. Let's see—" He began to read at random:

"To be or not to be: that is the question:
Whether it is better in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them? To die, to sleep;
And by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to . . .

"Hmm, not bad, not bad at all," he commented. "Perchance this book is not as worthless as at first 'twould seem."

At this point Professor Mungoos decided that he might strengthen his own case by exhibiting a familiarity with the great poetry of the Bard, and he started to quote *Macbeth* at *Macbeth*'s bloodiest.

"Ooh! I like that *not!"* Bess cried. "Tom, cannot we not be rid of this abominable small creature? Can you not expel it from our house?"

"Of course I can," declared her husband, handing her the book, "and it's high time I did!"

He stood, took up his grimoire, opened it, read aloud a spell so awful that, even though he understood not a word, Professor Mungoos trembled in his soul.

"Please, *NO!"* he shrieked.

"Thou shalt not cozen me, fiend!" answered Bretnor, opening a packet of mysterious substances taken from beside the skull and holding it above the brazier. "Now I shall summon those Powers who shall return you to your master." And aloud, as he emptied the packet into the coals, he called out several vast and terrible Names.

Instantly there was flame. Instant-

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ly there was smoke. Professor Mungoos screamed just once as it enveloped him, and Bess told Thomas afterward that she had seen great black clawed hands seizing him.

Then, just as suddenly, the smoke cleared. The pentacle was empty.

Thomas Bretnor shrugged. "Well," he said, "we managed that very nicely, didn't we? I must say, Bess, that you were very brave."

"If I weren't —" She smiled. "— dear Tom, I never would have married you. But —" She shuddered. "— Tom, *must* we have these stinks? Could we not open up a little window?"

"Of course," he answered, and did so. "And now," he said, "can you busy yourself with other tasks? I fain would be left to read this book. I have the feeling that that foolish demon may unwittingly have presented us with something much worth the having."

For two hours, Thomas Bretnor read, an excerpt here, an excerpt there, familiarizing himself with the strange type, the unaccustomed punctuation. Finally he joined Bess downstairs.

"We very surely do have something here, dear Bess," he told her. "Of course, these plays are not something I can offer as my own — it would be very damaging to my profession. But that young man you mentioned, the one with the same name. I can copy the plays out one by one — with a few changes and improvements, to be sure — and it'll be to our mutual profit for him to offer them under his name and to keep a close mouth as to their origin. So let us send a message for him to wait upon us, say, three days from now. In the meantime —" He smiled at her. "—there's no hour like the present to begin, so do'st thou fetch me paper and inkpot and a good goosequill."

She brought them forthwith.

Then, pen in hand, the book before him on the table, Thomas Bretnor sat down to write Shakespeare.

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OPPOSITE!

I spent the last few days in Philadelphia attending the sessions of the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, largely because I was taking part in a symposium on interstellar travel, and because it gives me pleasure, now and then, to wear my scientist hat.

In the course of those days I was interviewed four times, and, on one of the occasions, the interviewer said, "But what is antimatter?"

Fortunately, she asked the question of a fellow interviewee, so I let him do the work of explaining and I occupied myself in thinking, with some amusement, of where *I* had first heard of antimatter. It was through my science fiction reading, of course.

In the April 1937 issue of *Astounding Science Fiction*, John D. Clark had a story entitled "Minus Planet," in which an object made of antimatter had blundered into the Solar System and was threatening our planet. That was my first encounter with the concept.

Then, in the August 1937 issue of the same magazine, there was a nonfiction piece by R. D. Swisher, entitled "What are Positrons?" and again I learned about antimatter.

Consequently, when in 1939 I began to write robot series, I gave my robots "positronic brains" as a glamorous science fictional variation of

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the flat and uninspiring "electronic brains."

But when did knowledge of antimatter really start? For that we have to go back to 1928.

In 1928, the English physicist Paul Adrien Maurice Dirac* (1902-1984) was studying the electron, one of the only two subatomic particles known at that time, the other being the proton.

For the purpose, Dirac made use of relativistic wave mechanics, the mathematics of which had been worked out by the Austrian physicist, Erwin Schrodinger (1887-1961) only two years earlier. In the process, Dirac found that the energy content of a moving electron could be either positive or negative. The positive figure obviously represented the ordinary electron, but, in that case, what did the negative figure (equal in everything but sign) represent?

The easiest way out was to suppose that the negative sign was a mathematical artifact with no meaning in physics, but Dirac preferred to find a meaning, if he could.

Suppose that the Universe was made up of a sea of energy levels, with all the negative levels filled with electrons. Above this sea, there is a large but finite number of electrons distributed among the positive energy levels.

If, for some reason, an electron in the sea gains enough energy, it comes popping out of the sea to occupy one of the positive energy levels, and it is then the kind of ordinary electron scientists had grown familiar with. In the sea, however, the departure of the electron leaves a "hole," and this hole behaves as a particle with properties that are the opposite of those of the electron.

Thus, since the electron has an electric charge, that charge had to have been withdrawn from the sea, and the hole that appeared must carry a charge of an opposite nature. Since the electron, by a convention that goes back to Benjamin Franklin, is said to have a negative electric charge, the hole must behave as though it has a positive electric charge.

If, then, energy is converted into an electron, the production of the electron must always entail the simultaneous production of a hole, or "antielectron." (The hole is the opposite of an electron, and the prefix "anti-" is from a Greek word meaning "opposite.") Dirac was thus pre-

**Dirac was the son of an immigrant schoolteacher from the French-speaking portion of Switzerland, hence his name.*

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dicting "pair-production," the simultaneous production of an electron and an antielectron, and it seemed quite clear that you could not produce one of them without the other.

In our section of the Universe, however, there already exists a large number of electrons, without any sign of an equivalent number of antielectrons. If we accept this fact without questioning the matter too closely, then we can see that once another electron is produced along with its accompanying hole, then, surely, one or another of the many electrons in existence is going to fall into that hole, and do it in a very short time.

Dirac thus predicted that an antielectron was a very short-lived object, which would account for the fact that no one seemed to have encountered one at that time. What's more, Dirac saw that one could not get rid of an antielectron without, at the same time, getting rid of an electron, and vice-versa. In other words, you have "mutual annihilation."

In mutual annihilation, the particles must emit, once more, the energy that had been consumed in the pair-production. Mutual annihilation, therefore, had to be accompanied by the production of energetic radiation, or of other particles traveling at high speeds and possessing high kinetic energy, or both.

Since there were only two particles known at the time Dirac worked this out, the negatively-charged electron and the positively-charged proton, he wondered at first if the proton were, by any chance, the antielectron.

Clearly, though, that could not be. In the first place, the proton is 1837 times as massive as the electron, and it didn't seem at all likely that kicking an electron out of the negative-energy-level sea would produce a hole 1837 times as massive as that of the extracted particle. The properties of the hole, it seemed logical to suppose, might be opposite in character to those of the extracted particle, but must be the same in quantity.

Thus, the electric charge of the electron is negative, so the electric charge of the antielectron should be positive, but the negative charge of one and the positive charge of the other should be precisely the same in quantity. There, at least, the proton fits the bill. Its positive charge is precisely as large as the electron's negative charge.

But this should go for the mass, too. The antielectron might have the same kind of mass the electron does, or perhaps an opposite "antimass," but either way, the mass or antimass should be precisely equal to that

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of the electron. The proton had the same kind of mass the electron had, but it was widely different in amount.

Furthermore, by Dirac's reasoning, an antielectron ought to be very short-lived and ought to undergo mutual annihilation, almost at once, with any electron it encountered. A proton, however, appeared to be completely stable and showed no tendency whatever to undergo mutual annihilation with electrons.

Dirac, therefore, came to the conclusion that the antielectron was *not* the proton, but was a particle with the mass of an electron and a positive charge.

Still, no one had ever encountered such a positively-charged electron, so that most physicists found Dirac's suggestions interesting but insubstantial. They might be merely the speculations of a theorist who was attaching too much literal meaning to mathematical relationships. Until some appropriate observation was made, therefore, Dirac's notions had to be filed under "Interesting, but—"

While Dirac was developing his theory, a Homeric struggle was raging among physicists over the nature of cosmic rays. Some, of whom the American physicist Robert Andrews Millikan (1868-1953) was the most important, insisted that they were a train of electromagnetic waves, even more energetic and, therefore, shorter in wavelength, than gamma rays. Others, of whom the American physicist Arthur Holly Compton (1892-1962) was the most important, insisted that they were a stream of massive, speedy, electrically-charged particles. (I won't keep you in suspense. Compton won a complete and unqualified victory.)

In the course of the battle, Millikan had one of his students, Carl David Anderson (1905-), study the details of cosmic ray interaction with the atmosphere. The highly energetic cosmic rays struck the nuclei of atoms in the atmosphere and produced a spray of subatomic particles not much less energetic than the original cosmic rays themselves. It seemed possible that one might argue backward from the particles produced to the nature of the entity that did the producing and thus decide whether the latter was radiational or particulate in nature.

For the purpose, Anderson used a cloud chamber surrounded by a very strong magnetic field. The particles passing through the cloud chamber, which contained gases supersaturated with water vapor, produced charged atom-fragments (or "ions") that acted as nuclei for

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the formation of tiny water droplets. The passage of the particles was thus marked by a thin line of droplets.

What's more, since the particles so detected were electrically charged, their paths (and therefore the lines of droplets) would curve in the presence of a magnetic field. The path of a particle carrying a positive electric charge would curve in one direction, the path of one carrying a negative electric charge would curve in the other direction. The faster the particle, and the more massive, the less it would curve.

The trouble was that the particles produced by cosmic rays smashing into nuclei were so massive or so speedy (or both) that they hardly curved at all. Anderson found there was very little, if anything, he could deduce from their paths.

He therefore had the ingenious idea of putting a lead plate, about 6 millimeters (¼ inch) thick, across the center of the cloud chamber. Particles smashing into it had more than enough energy to plow right through it. In doing so, however, they would use up quite a bit of their energy and would emerge moving more slowly. They would then curve more sharply and something might be deduced.

In August 1932, Anderson was studying the photographs of various cloud chamber results he had obtained and was struck by one in particular. It showed a curved track that looked exactly like the curved tracks produced by speeding electrons.

The track was more curved on one side of the lead plate than on the other. He knew, therefore, that it had entered the chamber on the side of the lesser curvature. It had passed through the lead plate, which slowed it down so that it was more curved on that side. But if it were an electron that had traveled in that direction, it should have curved in the other direction. From its curve, then, Anderson could see at once that he had detected a positively-charged electron — the antielectron, in fact.

Naturally, other examples were quickly found, and it was plain that, just as Dirac had predicted, the antielectron did not last long. Within a billionth of a second or so, it would encounter an electron, and mutual annihilation would take place, with the production of two gamma rays, which were emitted in opposite directions.

Dirac promptly received a Nobel prize for physics in 1933, and Anderson got one in 1936.

One thing about the discovery makes me unhappy. The new particle should have been called the antielectron, as I have been calling it up to now, for that name describes it exactly as "the opposite electron."

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However, Anderson thought of it as a positive electron. He therefore took the first five letters and the last three letters of the phrase and collapsed it to "positron." That has remained its name ever since.

Of course, if the antielectron is called a positron, then the electron itself ought to be called a "negatron." Then, too, it is not the "-ron" that is the characteristic suffix of subatomic particles, but "-on" as in proton, meson, gluon, lepton, muon, pion, photon, graviton, and so on. If we insist on giving the antielectron a name of its own, then it should be "positon." Indeed, in 1947, there was a move to make use of that name and to call the electron a "negaton," but that failed resoundingly.

It has been "electron" and "positron" ever since, and the two are now unchangeable. But then, science is filled with wrong-headed names wished on it by scientists acting under impulse. (Thus, Murray Gell-Mann invented the ugly term "quark" for the fundamental particles that make up protons. He got it out of *Finnegan's Wake*, but that doesn't make it any less ugly. Perhaps he didn't know that in German "quark" means "trash" or "rubbish.")

Once you have an antielectron, it is impossible to stop there. Dirac's mathematical analysis works precisely the same for protons, for instance, as it does for electrons, Therefore, if there is an antielectron, there should also be an "antiproton."

Yet during the two decades that followed the discovery of the antielectron, there was no sign of an antiproton. Why was this?

No mystery. Mass is a very condensed form of energy, so that it takes a great deal of energy to produce even a small amount of mass. If you want to produce ten times as much mass, you must invest ten times as much energy. The amount of energy required quickly becomes prohibitive.

Since the proton is 1836 times as massive as an electron, it takes 1836 times as much energy (all crowded into the kind of tiny volume occupied by a subatomic particle) to produce an antiproton as it does to produce an antielectron.

To be sure, cosmic rays consist of streams of fast-moving massive particles that come in a wide range of energies. Some of the speediest of these particles and, therefore, the most energetic, have enough energy and to spare to form proton-antiproton pairs. For that reason, years were spent in carefully studying cosmic ray events by means of a variety of particle detectors, just in case an antiproton should show up. (Why

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not? Detect one and you were sure of a Nobel prize.)

One trouble was that as one went up the energy range, the number of cosmic ray particles possessing that energy decreased. The percentage of cosmic ray particles possessing enough energy to form a proton-antiproton pair was but a small fraction of the whole. This meant that among the large and complex melange of particles produced by cosmic ray bombardment, any antiprotons formed would be totally masked by the crowds of others.

Occasionally, someone thought he had detected an antiproton and reported it, but the evidence was never unmistakeable. The antiprotons might well have been there, but no one could be sure.

What was needed was a man-made source of energy, one that could be controlled and refined so as to increase the chances of producing and spotting antiprotons. That meant a particle accelerator, one that was more powerful than any built in the 1930's and 1940's.

Finally, in 1954, a particle accelerator was constructed that would produce the necessary energies. This was the "Bevatron" built in Berkeley, California.

In 1955, the Italian-American physicist Emilio Segre (1905-) and his American colleague Owen Chamberlain (1920-) worked out a scheme for accomplishing the task.

The plan was to bombard a copper target with very high-energy protons. This should produce proton-antiproton pairs and a great many other subatomic particles, too. All the particles produced could be made to pass through a strong magnetic field. Protons and other positively-charged particles would curve in one direction. Antiprotons and other negatively-charged particles would curve in the other direction.

It was calculated that the antiprotons would travel at a certain speed and with a certain curvature. All other negatively-charged particles would travel more slowly, or more quickly, and with a different curvature. If, then, a detecting device were placed in some appropriate place and made to operate only at a particular (very short) time after the proton-copper collision, it would be antiprotons and only antiprotons that would be detected. In this way, streams of antiprotons *were* detected.

Naturally, if antiprotons were produced they would not endure long before encountering the numerous protons that occurred in the Universe all about us. Segre and Chamberlain allowed the stream of sup-

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posed antiprotons which they had detected to strike a piece of glass. Innumerable mutual annihilations took place between the antiprotons in the stream and the protons in the glass.

These annihilations produced particles that could travel through glass more quickly than light could. (It is only in a vacuum that nothing can travel faster than light.) The particles, as they outpaced light, left a wake of light, called Cherenkov radiation, behind them. The radiation so released was precisely what would be produced by proton-antiproton annihilation.

In both ways, then, by the direct detection of antiprotons and by the study of the radiation produced by annihilation, there was clear evidence that antiprotons had been detected. As a result Segre and Chamberlain shared the Nobel prize for physics in 1959.

By then, many subatomic particles had been discovered in addition to the electron and proton. Once the antiproton was discovered it was easy to suppose that opposites would exist for the new particles, too.

That turned out to be right. Every electrically-charged particle known has a corresponding particle with a charge opposite to itself. There are "antimuons," "antipions," "antihyperons," "antiquarks," and so on. Every last one of these opposite particles is named by placing the prefix "anti-" before the name of the particle itself. Only the antielectron is an exception — and the lone exception. It is still called the positron, which must surely annoy anyone who, like myself, values order and method in nomenclature.

All the "anti-" objects can be lumped as "antiparticles."

But what about particles that are *not* charged?

In 1932, the English physicist James Chadwick (1891-1974) discovered the "neutron," which is just a hair more massive than the proton and differs from that particle in being electrically neutral. (Chadwick received the Nobel prize for physics in 1935 as a result.)

The neutron was found to be the third major component of atoms and of ordinary matter in general. The most common isotope of hydrogen, hydrogen-1, has a single proton as its nucleus, but all other atoms have nuclei made up of both protons and neutrons, and these nuclei are accompanied by one or more electrons in the outskirts of the atoms.

No further major components of atoms have ever been found, or are expected to be found. Ordinary matter is made up of protons, neutrons, and electrons and that's all. All other subatomic particles (and there are

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many) are unstable, high-energy manifestations, or else, if long-lived, exist by themselves and not as part of matter.

What about the neutron, now? An electron is negatively charged while an antielectron is positively charged. A proton is positively charged while an antiproton is negatively charged. The neutron, however, is neutral. It has no charge. What is the opposite of no charge?

Nevertheless, physicists couldn't help thinking there might be an antineutron just the same, even if an electric charge wasn't involved.

Thus, it was reasoned that if a proton and an antiproton whisked by each other in a near miss, they might not succeed in undergoing mutual annihilation, but they might manage to neutralize each other's electric charge. That would leave two neutral particles that might be opposed to each other in some way, in other words a neutron and an antineutron.

Again, if a neutron and an antineutron are formed, the antineutron ought, soon enough, to collide with a neutron and undergo mutual annihilation, producing particles in some characteristic way.

In 1956, that antineutron was, indeed, discovered, and in 1958 its annihilation reaction was pinpointed. Antiparticles were by then so taken for granted, however, that the discovery of the antineutron did not generate a Nobel prize.

And how does the antineutron differ from the neutron? Well, for one thing, although the neutron does not have an overall electric charge, it has something characterized as "spin" that generates a magnetic field. The antineutron has a spin in the opposite direction and a magnetic field that is, therefore, oriented in the direction opposite to that of the neutron.

In 1965, physicists succeeded in bringing together an antiproton and an antineutron and having them cling together. In ordinary matter, a proton and a neutron, clinging together, make up the nucleus of an atom of hydrogen-2 or "deuterium." What was formed, then, was an "antideuterium" nucleus.

It is clear that an antideuterium nucleus, carrying a negative charge, could easily hold on to a positively charged antielectron. In this way an "antiatom" would be formed, Larger antiatoms could be formed,in principle. The difficulty would consist in forcing all the antiprotons and antineutrons together and, while this was being done, keeping them from undergoing mutual annihilation through random collision with ordinary matter.

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We can also imagine antiatoms clinging together to form antimolecules and still larger aggregations. Such aggregations wold be "antimatter," though this term could be applied even to antiparticles. And there you have the answer to the question I described at the beginning of the essay as having been raised by the interviewer.

For a long time, it was supposed that, since particles could not be formed unless accompanied by corresponding antiparticles, there should be as much antimatter in the Universe as matter.

Our Solar system is composed entirely of matter, as otherwise mutual annihilations would occur frequently enough to produce detectable results. Indeed, similar reasoning leads us to be certain that our entire Galaxy is composed of matter only.

Yet might there be not galaxies somewhere composed of antimatter exclusively — "antigalaxies"? It was tempting to suppose that such did exist and were as numerous as galaxies, but the latest theories suggest that particles and antiparticles were not produced in absolutely equal quantities at the time of the big bang. A tiny excess of particles was produced, and this "tiny" excess was still enough to suffice for the building of our vast Universe.

Another question — do all particles, without exception, have antiparticles?

No. A few uncharged particles (not all) are their own antiparticles, so to speak. An example is the photon, which is the unit of all electromagnetic radiation from gamma rays to radio waves, and including visible light. The photon is both particle and antiparticle, and there is no separate "antiphoton" even in theory.

If there were antiphotons, then the antistars in antigalaxies would emit antiphotons. We could then identify distant objects as antigalaxies by studying the light we receive from them. In actual fact, however, antigalaxies, if there were any, would produce the same light that galaxies do, and photons would be no guide to the existence and location of antigalaxies.

The graviton (which mediates the gravitational interaction) is also its own antiparticle. This means that we can't distinguish between distant galaxies and antigalaxies by any difference in gravitational behavior.

The neutral pion is still another example of a particle that is its own antiparticle.

—And a final question. Might antimatter have some practical use? If not now, then someday?

Let me discuss that aspect of the subject next month.

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Jonathan Carroll's first story for F&SF begins as a heart-warming tale of a man and his dog who befriend a young girl; where it ends is Something Else entirely . . .

Friend's Best Man

BY
JONATHAN CARROLL

1.

It was in all of the papers. Two even carried the same headline: "FRIEND'S BEST MAN!" But I didn't see any of that until long afterward; until I was home from the hospital awhile and the shock had begun to wear off.

After it happened, scores of eye-witnesses suddenly appeared. But I don't remember seeing anyone around that day: just Friend and me and a very long freight train.

Friend is a seven-year-old Jack Russell Terrier. He looks like a mutt: stubby legs, indiscriminate brown and white coloring; a very plain dog's face topped with intelligent, sweet eyes. But truth be told, Jack Russells are rare and I ended up spending a wad for him. Although I've never had much money to play with until recently, one of my quirks has always been to buy the best whenever I could afford it.

When it came time to buy a dog, I went out searching for a real *dog*. Not one of those froufrou breeds that constantly need to be clipped and combed. Nor did I want one of those chic things that came from Estonia or somewhere strange that looked more like an alligator than a dog. I went to animal shelters and kennels and finally found Friend through an ad in a dog magazine. The only thing I didn't like about him on first sight was his name: Friend. It was too full of kitsch and didn't belong to a dog that looked like it would be very comfortable smoking a corncob pipe. Even as a puppy he was built low to the ground and looked fuzzily solid. He was a

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"Bill," a "Ned." "Jack" would have suited him, too, if he hadn't already had that as a breed name. But the woman who sold him to me said he had that name for a very specific reason: whenever he barked (which was rarely), it came out sounding like the word *friend*. I was skeptical, but she was right; while his brothers and sisters yapped and yelped, this guy stood solidly there and said, "Friend! Friend! Friend!" time after time while his tail wagged back and forth. It was a strange thing to hear, but I liked him even more for it. As a result, he stayed "Friend."

I have always marveled at how well dogs and people get along. They move so comfortably into your life, choose a chair to sleep on, figure out your moods, and have no trouble bending themselves to a curve that should be completely strange and inappropriate. From the first, they fall asleep so easily in a foreign land.

Before I go on, I must say that Friend never struck me as being anything more special or rare than a very good dog. He was excited when I came home from work, and liked to rest his head on my lap when I watched television. But he was not Jim the Wonder Dog: he didn't know how to count, or drive a car, or other marvels you sometimes read about in an article about dogs that appear to have "special" powers. Friend liked scrambled eggs, too, and would go jogging with me so long as it wasn't raining out and I wasn't going too far. By all accounts, I had gotten exactly what I wanted: a dog-dog who staked a small claim on part of my heart with his loyalty and joy. One who never asked much in return except a couple of pats often and a corner of the bed to sleep on when the weather turned cold.

The day it happened was sunny and clear. I put on my gym suit and shoes and did a few stretching exercises. Friend watched all of this from his chair, but when I got ready to go out, he hopped down and accompanied me to the door. I opened it, and he took a look at the weather.

"Do you want to go along?" If he didn't, his usual procedure was to collapse on the floor and not move again until I returned. But this time he wagged his tail and went outside with me. I was glad for his company.

We started down the hill toward the park. Friend liked to run alongside, about two feet away. When he was a puppy, I'd tripped over him a couple of times because he had the habit of running in and out of my path, fully expecting me to keep tabs on where he was at all times. But I'm one of those joggers who watches everything but his feet when I go. As a result, we'd had a few magnificent collisions and mad yelps that left him wary of my sense of navigation.

We crossed Ober Road and ran through Harold Park toward the railroad tracks. Once we got there, we'd

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go about a mile and a half along them until we reached the station, then circle slowly back toward home.

Friend knew the route so well that he could afford to make stops along the way, both to relieve himself and to investigate any new interesting sights or smells that had appeared since our last trip there.

Once in a while a train came along, but you could hear it from far off and there was lots of time to move off to the side and give it wide berth. I liked it when trains came through; liked hearing them lumber up behind you and pass while you picked up pace to see how long you could keep up with the engine. A couple of the engineers knew us and tooted their shrill whistles as they passed. I liked that, and I think Friend did, too, because he always stopped and barked a couple of times just to let them know who was boss.

That morning we were about halfway to the station when I heard one coming. As always, I looked to see where Friend was. A couple of feet away, he ran jauntily along, his tongue a pink sliver out the side of his mouth.

As the train's giant clatter approached, I watched a car cross the tracks a couple of hundred feet in front of us. How dumb of the driver to do that when he knew a train was so close! What was the hurry? By the time that thought passed, the train felt close over my left shoulder. I looked to my right to check on Friend again, but he wasn't there. I whipped my head this way and that, but he was nowhere around. In a complete panic, I spun around and saw him in the middle of the tracks sniffing at something, all of his attention concentrated there.

"Friend! Come here!"

He wagged his tail but didn't lift his head. I ran for him and called again and again.

"Friend! Goddamn it, Friend!"

The tone of my voice finally got through to him because when the train was only fifteen feet away, already putting on its brakes, he looked up.

I ran as fast as I could and felt stones fly out from beneath my sneakers.

"Friend, get out!"

He didn't know the words, but the tone told him he was in for a hell of a smack. He did the worst possible thing: tucked his head down into his small shoulders and waited for me to come get him.

The train was there. In the instant before I jumped, I knew I had one choice, but I'd already made it before I ever moved. Lunging for my Friend, I bent down and tried to grab him up and roll out of the way all at once. And I almost succeeded. I almost succeeded — except for my leg, which stuck straight behind me as I jumped and was sliced cleanly off by the huge wheels.

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2.

I met Jasenka in the hospital. Jasenka Ciric. No one could say ya-ZEN-ka very well, so people had been calling her "Jazz" all her life.

She was seven years old and had spent most of her life connected to one or another ominous machine that helped her fight a long, losing battle against her undependable body. Her skin was the color of a white candle in a dark room, lips the violet of foreign money. Her many illnesses made her serious, while her youth kept her buoyant and hopeful.

Because she'd spent so much time in bed in hospital rooms surrounded by unfamiliar faces, white walls, and few pictures on the walls, she had only two hobbies: reading and watching television. When she watched TV, her face contracted and then set into complete solemnity and concentration: a member of the family reading someone's will for the first time. But when she read, no matter what the book, that face was expressionless and empty of anything.

I met her because she'd read about Friend and me in the newspapers. One of the nurses came to my room a week after it happened, and asked if I'd be willing to have a visit with Jazz Ciric (CHEER-itch). When she explained the girl and her situation to me, I envisioned an ill angel along the lines of Shirley Temple or at least Darla in "The Little Rascals." Instead, Jasenka Ciric had a peculiar, interesting face where everything was pointy and too close together. Her thick hair curled like the stuffing in old furniture and was just about the same color.

The nurse introduced us and then went off on her rounds. Jazz sat in the chair next to my bed and sized me up. I was still in great pain, but had earlier decided to be a little less self-pitying. This visit was to be my first move in that direction.

"What's your favorite book?"

"I don't know. I guess *The Great Gatsby*. What's yours?"

She shrugged and tsk'd her tongue once, as if the answer were self-evident.

"Ladies with Their Nightgowns on Fire."

"That's a book? Who wrote it?"

"Egan Moore."

I smiled. *My* name is Egan Moore. "What's the story?"

She looked at me very carefully and proceeded to spin out one of those endlessly rambling tales only a kid could love.

"Then the monsters jumped out of the trees and took them all back to the evil castle where Scaldor the Evil King . . ."

What I liked about it was the way she acted out the story as she went on. Scaldor had a nasty squint; which Jazz demonstrated to perfection. When someone got crept up on, her fingers curled into a witch's grip and tiptoed like little devils across the air separating us.

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". . . And they they got home *just* in time for their favorite TV show." She sat back, tired but obviously satisfied with her performance.

"Sounds like a terrific story. I wish I *had* written it."

"It is. Can I ask you a question now?"

"Ask away."

"Who's taking care of Friend now?"

"My next-door neighbor."

"Have you seen him since the accident?"

"No."

"Are you mad at him for making you lose your leg?"

I thought for a minute, deciding whether to talk to her as a child or as an adult. A quick scan of her face said she demanded adult standing; had no time to fool around.

"No, I'm not mad at him. I guess I'm mad at somebody, but I don't know who. I don't know if it was anyone's fault. I'm sure not mad at Friend."

She came to visit me every day after that. Usually sometime in the morning when both of us were fresh from sleep and chipper. I was all right mornings, but not most afternoons. For some reason, the enormity of what had happened to me and how it would affect the rest of my life came in the door with my lunch tray and stayed long after visiting hours were over. I thought about things like the bird that stands around on one leg all day. Or the joke about the one-legged man in an ass-kicking contest. I thought about the fact that words like ***kick*** would no longer be part of my body's vocabulary. I knew they made remarkable prosthetic legs—Science on the March! — but that was little comfort. I wanted back what was mine: not something that would make me, at best, "as good as new," as the therapist said every time we talked about it.

Jazz and I became good friends. She made my days in the hospital happier and my perspective wider. I have known only two mortally ill people in my life, my mother and Jasenka. Both of them looked at the world through the same urgent yet grateful eyes. When there is not much time left, it seems the eyes' capacity to see broadens tenfold. The things they see are more often than not details that were previously ignored but are, suddenly, an important part of what makes the scene complete. On her visits to my room, Jazz's observations about people we knew in common, or the way the light came through the window in different-sized blades . . . were both mature and compelling. Dying, she had fast developed a poet's, a cynic's, an artist's eye for the world around her, small as it was.

On the first day I was allowed outside, my next-door neighbor Kathleen surprised me by bringing Friend to the hospital to say hello. Dogs weren't normally allowed on the grounds, but an exception had been

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made because of the circumstances.

I was glad to see the old boy, and it was a surprisingly long time before I remembered he was the reason for my being there. He kept trying to climb into my lap, and I would have liked that if his scrambling to get there hadn't hurt my leg so much. As it was, I threw his ball for him a few thousand times while I chatted with Kathleen. Half an hour later, I asked the nurse if it would be possible for Jazz to come down and meet my friends.

It was arranged and, bundled to her ears in blankets, Ms. Ciric was introduced to His Nibs, Friend Moore. They shook hands gravely (Friend's one and only trick — he loved to "Shake!"), and he allowed her to stroke his head while the four of us sat there and enjoyed the mild afternoon sun.

I had been encouraged by the doctor to take a small walk on my crutches so, half an hour later while Jazz kept Friend by her side, I tried out my new aluminum crutches with Kathleen alongside just in case.

It was the wrong time to do it. In happier days, I had passed many pleasant hours fantasizing what it would be like to live with Kathleen. I think she liked me, too, despite the fact that we were relatively new neighbors. Before the accident we had been spending more and more time together, and that was just fine with me. I'd been trying to figure out how to move in closer to her heart. But now, when I dared look up from the treacherous ground in front of me, I saw that her face was full of all the wrong kind of concern and compassion. More than any other time before or after, I was aware of my loss.

The day was ruined, but I tried hard to hide that from Kathleen. I said I was tired and cold, and would she mind if we went back to Jazz and Friend. From a distance, the two of them were so still and serious: they looked like one of those early photographs of people living in the American West.

"What've you two guys been doing?"

Kathleen looked quickly at me to see if she'd done anything to deserve this not-so-subtle dismissal. I avoided her eyes.

Twenty minutes later I was back in bed, feeling nasty, impotent, lost. The phone next to me rang. It was Jazz.

"Egan, Friend's going to help you now. He told me that today when you were walking with Kathleen. He said I could tell you."

"Really? What's he going to do?" I smiled, thinking she was about to launch into another of her wacky stories over the phone. I liked hearing her voice, liked her being in the room with me then.

"He's going to do a lot! He said he'd been thinking about the best thing he could do for you, but now he

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knows. I can't tell you because it's going to be a big surprise."

"What does his voice sound like, Jazz?"

"Kind of like Paul McCartney."

Every couple of days, Kathleen and Friend came by to visit. Most of the time it was just the three of us, but once in a while Jazz felt well enough to come down and join us. When that happened, we'd all sit together for a while, then I would take my stroll around the grounds with Kathleen.

Jazz didn't say anything more about Friend talking to her, but the Paul McCartney part sent Kathleen into howls of laughter when I told her the story.

Kathleen turned out to be a genuinely nice woman who did whatever she could to make life happier for both Jazz and me. Of course that niceness and consideration made me fall completely in love with her, which only complicated and made matters worse. Life had begun to show it had an extremely cynical sense of humor.

"I have to tell you something."

"What?"

"I love you."

Eyes widened in fear. "No you don't."

"Oh, but I do, Egan." she said to me. *To me.* "When you come home, can we live together?"

I looked across the lawn. Jazz and Friend were way over there. Jazz raised her arm slowly and waved it back and forth: her sign that everything was all right.

The night before I left the hospital for home, I want to Jazz's room for a last visit. Some innard had once again betrayed her, and she looked terribly tired and pale. I sat by her bed and held her cool hand. Although I tried to dissuade her, she insisted on telling me a long new installment about Sloothack, the Fire Pig. Like Jazz's family, Sloothack was from Yugoslavia; way, way up in the mountains where sheep walked on their two hind legs and secret agents from all countries hid out between assignments. Jazz was crazy about secret agents.

I'd heard a lot of Slooth stories, but this last one was a dilly. It involved a Nazi tank, the lakes of Plitvice, Uncle Vuk from Belgrade, and a leather window.

When she was through, she looked even paler than before. So pale that I was a little worried about her.

"Are you O.K., Jazz?"

"Yes. Will you come and see me every week, Egan, like you promised?"

"Absolutely. All three of us will come if you'd like."

"That's O.K. — maybe just you and Friend in the beginning. Kathleen can stay at home if she's tired."

I smiled and nodded. She was jealous of the new "woman in my life."

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She knew Kathleen and I had decided to try and live together. Maybe I had the guts to drop my self-pity and fight to make things work the right way. I was certainly scared, but just as eager and excited about the chances and possibilities.

"Can I call you when I need you, Jazz?" I said it because I knew she'd like hearing she was needed even when lying in bed, weak as a mouse.

"Yes, you can call me, but I'll have to call you, too, to tell you what Friend says."

"Yeah, but how will you know what he says? He'll be over at my house."

She scowled and rolled her eyes. I was being dumb again. "How many times do I have to tell you, Egan? I get *messages.*"

"That's right. What was the last one?"

"Friend said he was going to fix you and Kathleen up."

"Friend did that? I thought I did."

"Yes, you did some, but he did the rest. He said you needed some help." She said it with such conviction.

What surprised me most about what followed was how quick and easy it was to get used to an entirely different life. Kathleen wasn't an angel, but she gave me all the kindness and space I needed. It made me feel both loved and free, which is a pretty remarkable combination. In return, I tried to give her what she said she liked most about me: humor, respect, and a way of seeing life that — according to her — was both ironic and forgiving.

Actually, I was living two entirely new lives: one as a partner, the other as one of the disabled. It was an emotional, often overwhelming time, and I don't know if I'd ever want to repeat it, although much of it was as close to the sublime as I'll ever get.

Kathleen went to work in the morning, leaving Friend and me to our own devices. That usually meant a slow walk down to the corner store for a newspaper and then an hour or two outdoors in the sun on the patio. The rest of the day was spent puttering and thinking and learning to readjust to a world that had been knocked slightly off-center for me in many different ways.

I also talked frequently with Jasenka and went to visit her once a week, always with Friend along for the ride. If the weather was bad and Jazz couldn't come outside, I'd park Friend with Nurse Dornhelm at the reception desk and pick him up on my way out.

One afternoon I entered her room and saw a mammoth new machine clicking eerily and importantly away by the side of her bed. The tubes and wires that connected her to it were all either silvery or a vague pink.

But what really clubbed my heart were the new pajamas she was wear-

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ing: *Star Wars* pajamas with two-inch-high robots and creatures printed at all angles and in all colors everywhere. She had been talking about those pajamas for a long time; from before I left the hospital. I knew her parents had promised them to her for her next birthday if she was good. I could only surmise she had them now because of the new machine; because there might not be another birthday.

"Hey Jazz, you got the new jams!"

She was sitting up very straight and smiling, happy as hell, a pink tube in her nose, a silver one in her arm.

The machine percolated and hummed, its green and black dials registering levels and drawing graphs that said everything but explained nothing.

"You know who gave them to me, Egan? Friend! Friend sent them to me from the store. They came in a box in my favorite color — red. He got my pajamas and he sent them to me in a red box. Aren't they beautiful? Look at R2D2. Right here." She pointed to a spot above her belly button.

We talked for a while about the pajamas, Friend's generosity, the new *Star Wars* figure I'd brought for her collection. She didn't bring up the subject of Kathleen, and neither did I. Although she approved of Kathleen in a brusque, sort of sisterly way, Jazz had no time for "her" now because our time together was so much less than before. Besides, Jazz and I had a separate world of our own we shared that consisted of hospital gossip, Friend gossip, and Jasenka Ciric stories, the latest of which, "A Pet Mountain," I had to hear once again from start to finish.

" 'And then Friend gave Jazz the pajamas and they all hopped into bed and watched television all night.' "

"Friend really gave you them, Jazz? What a great guy."

"He is! And you know what, Egan? He told me he's going to fix it up so you win that contest."

"What contest?"

"You know — the one from the magazines? The one you told me about last time? Million Dollar FlyAway?"

"I'm going to win a million bucks? That'd be nice."

She shook her head, eyes closed, and moved the pink tube to one side.

"No, not the million dollars. You'll win the hundred thousand dollars. Fourth Prize."

A few minutes later (after we'd decided how I'd spend my winnings), Mr. and Mrs. Ciric came in. The scared look on both of their faces when they saw the new machine told me it was time to go.

Out in the hall, Mrs. Ciric stopped me and gently pulled me aside. She looked at my crutches and touched my hand.

"The doctors say this new machine will do wonderful things, but my husband, Zdravko, he doesn't believe them."

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Having spent so much time with Jazz, I felt comfortable with Mrs. Ciric and hugely admired her for having the strength to face this constant sadness every day of her life.

"Well, I don't know if it's that machine or just those new pajamas, but I think she looks really fine today, Mrs. Ciric. There's certainly a lot more color in her cheeks."

Looking straight at me, she began to cry. "I bought those for her for her birthday, you know? Now, I don't like to think about her birthday, Egan. I wanted her to have them now." She tried to smile. Then, unembarrassedly, wiped her hand across her nose. "Mothers are very stupid, eh? I saw Friend downstairs. I said to him, 'Shake hands! ' and he did right away. Jasenka, you know, loves him very much. She says he calls her up on the telephone sometimes."

She turned and went back into the room. As I walked away, I pictured her and her husband standing over that complicated bed, watching their daughter with helpless eyes, trying to figure out what any of them had done to deserve this.

A few weeks passed. I went back to work. The new machine did help Jazz. Kathleen finished moving the rest of her stuff into my apartment.

One of the television networks calls and asked if I'd be willing to go on a show and talk about how I'd saved Friend. I thought it over and decided against it: there had been enough hoopla in the newspapers already, and something deep inside told me capitalizing on this wasn't the right thing to do. Kathleen agreed and gave me a nice hug to seal it. I consulted Friend while he lay across my lap one evening, but he didn't even lift his head.

Life wouldn't ever really return to the normal I had once known, but it *did* take its foot off the gas a little, slowing to cruising speed. Things weren't going by in such a blur anymore, and that was good.

The last glimmer of craziness came in the form of a large registered letter from *The Truth,* that god-awful newspaper that sports headlines like "I GAVE BIRTH TO A TRUCK" and is sold in supermarket checkout lines everywhere.

An editor offered me two thousand dollars for the exclusive rights to my story. But, according to him, it wasn't "quite vivid enough." so *The Truth* wanted to spice things up a little by saying Friend was either from outer space or The Lost Continent of Atlantis, et cetera, et cetera . . .

I wrote a very nice letter back saying I was all for it, but my dog had sworn me to secrecy about certain crucial matters of state, so I wasn't at liberty to . . .

"Egan?"

"Jazz? Hi, pal! How are you?"

"Not very good, but I had to call

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you up and tell you what Friend just told me."

Unconsciously, I looked around for the dog. He was on the other side of the room, looking straight at me. It made me feel a little funny.

"He's there with you, isn't he?"

"Yeah, Jazz, he's right here."

"I know. He said to tell you there's a man outside who's watching your house. Be very careful because he's a secret agent!"

"Now, Jazz — " I took a deep breath and stopped short of giving her a lecture over the phone about lying. It was fine to tell Sloothack stories. It was all right to say Friend talked to her sometimes. "Watch out for the creep at your door" stuff wasn't all right.

"Uh-oh, someone's coming, Egan. I have to go. Be careful!"

I hung up after she did. Standing there looking at the receiver, I wondered what I should do. Against my better judgment, I hobbled to the window and looked out. Naturally no one was there.

Then the doorbell rang. It scared me so much, I dropped one of my crutches.

"One second!" Bending to pick it up, I felt my heart drumming in my chest. There are moments in life when, for the smallest reason, you're filled with such dread or shock that there's little room left inside for anything else. What's most annoying is the smallness of the reason: the phone ringing you out of the trance of a good book, a person coming up behind and tapping you lightly on the left shoulder . . .

My hand was so fluttery, I couldn't even pick up the damned crutch for a long few seconds. The doorbell rang again.

"I'm coming! Wait!"

"Mr. Moore?" A postman stood there with a clipboard in his hand.

"Yes?"

"Registered letter. Sign here." He looked at my leg as I shifted my weight to take the clipboard.

"I read about you in the papers. Where's the dog?"

I signed and handed back the clipboard. "Somewhere around. Can I have the letter?"

"Yeah, sure, there you go. That must be some dog for you to do a thing like that."

His tone ticked me off, and he wouldn't stop looking at my leg. Some secret agent! I didn't even look at the letter. I just wanted him gone, the door closed, and my heart to calm down.

"Did you get a reward or something?"

"For what?"

"For saving your dog! You know, from the ASPCA or something."

"No, but I'll tell you something. He's going to take me to Mars with him the next time he goes!"

I looked right at him and smiled as insanely as I knew how. He took a

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step backward and beat it out of there lickety-split.

After I read the letter, I called Kathleen at work and told her I'd won ten thousand dollars in a contest.

There was silence on the other end. I could hear typewriters clacking in the background.

"Jazz told you that before."

"Yeah, but she said I'd win a *hundred* thousand, not ten. Not ten!" Too loud, too scared. I closed my eyes and waited, hoped for Kathleen to break the silence.

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. Um, Friend just came into the room."

He padded across the floor and sat down under the telephone table without looking at me.

"Kathleen, how come my dog is suddenly making me nervous?"

"I — "

"And how come there's this money?"

That evening both of us went to the hospital to visit Jazz. We left Friend at home, asleep in his favorite chair.

There were more tubes this time. The same machine as before, only a great many more tubes sprouting out from different parts of it, sneaking under the covers to her body.

She looked very ill. So much so that the first thing that came to mind when I saw her was: she's going to die. Cruel and true and obvious: she was going to die.

The left side of her mouth crawled up a notch in a tiny smile when she saw us. It was the tiredest, most resigned smile I had ever seen.

Kathleen stood in the doorway while I crossed to the bed. Jazz's eyes went from me to Kathleen to me again, watching to see what we would do.

I propped the crutches against the wall and maneuvered down into chair next to the bed.

"Hiya, kid."

The smile again and a finger wiggle from one of the hands lying crossed on the small hill of her chest.

"You won, didn't you?" The voice was thick and coated with phlegm.

I'd planned to be funny but firm when we spoke, but my plans were no match for her broken energy. Death was in charge here; she was its deputy, so she held all the cards.

"Can I talk to you alone, Egan?"

It was said so quietly that I was sure Kathleen couldn't have heard, but I winced anyway.

"Kat, would you mind if we were alone for a bit?"

She nodded, her face a mix of pity and confusion. She left, closing the door silently behind her.

"Kathleen sees another man sometimes, Egan. His name is Vitamin D. Sometimes she says she's going to work, but she goes over to his house instead." She watched me while she spoke, her eyes vacant, her voice untenanted by any kind of expression. Then she reached over and took my

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hand as gently as you pick up a pin that's fallen to the floor. "Just ask her. Friend told me before. He said you should know."

Our drive home was silent. The wind had picked up, and everything would whip back and forth for a while and then stop dead.

It was my night to make the dinner, so I went straight to the kitchen as soon as we got back to the apartment. Kathleen turned on the television in the living room. I heard her say something to Friend that sounded like a greeting.

I poured water into a pot for spaghetti and thought about the ten thousand dollars. I put butter and minced garlic into a frying pan and thought about Vitamin D, whoever *that* was.

"Oh damn! Friend, take that off! Friend! No!"

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing. Friend just jumped up on the couch with his bone. He made a spot. I'll get it."

She came into the kitchen shaking her head. "That beast! I keep telling him not to do that. It's the only time he ever growls at me." She was smiling and shaking her head.

"He's used to my old couch. It didn't matter much on that one."

She made a big fuss at the sink getting a rag, the cleaner, turning on the tap. "Well, this is a new couch and a new day!"

"Kat, stop for a moment, will you? I want to ask you something. Do you know a guy named Vitamin D?"

"A *guy* named 'Vitamin D'? No, but I know the guy who started it. Victor Dixon. He's the lead guitarist." She turned off the tap and squeezed the rag into the sink. "How do you know about Vitamin D? You never listen to rock."

"Who's Victor Dixon?"

"An old boyfriend of mine, who started that group. They've just begun to make it. They've begun showing their first video on MTV now. Did you see it?"

The water came to a boil. I wanted to drop the spaghetti in, but I couldn't right then. Too . . . scared?

"What went on with. . . . What went on between you two?"

She crossed her arms and sighed. her eyes were twinkling. "Jealous, huh? That's good! Well, I knew him in college. After that he disappeared for a few years, then he turned up one day and we hung around together for a couple of months. He was more friend than boyfriend, even though a lot of people thought we had a big thing going. Why're you asking? How'd we get onto this?"

"Jazz told me —"

Friend started barking crazily in the other room. "Friend! Friend! Friend!" It sounded like he'd gone totally nuts. Kathleen and I looked at each other and moved.

On television, a man beat a white baby seal over the head with a wooden truncheon. The seal screamed while its head spewed dark blood onto the snow.

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Friend stood next to the set and barked.

"Friend, stop!"

He kept on.

On television, a man pried open a wooden crate with a crowbar. Inside were ten dead parrots clumped together in a colorful, orderly row. Over the barking, I made out something about the illegal importation of rare birds into the United States.

"Friend, shut up!"

"Oh, Egan, look!"

A dog was strapped to an operating table. Its stomach was cut wide open, and its mouth was twisted up over its teeth.

All we needed then — a special on educational television about cruelty to animals.

It had been an impossible, weird day. The kind when the best thing you can do is throw up your hands, go directly to bed after dinner, and hope it ends at that.

But the air was full of something wrong and deep, and we ended up having everything out over dinner.

Victor Dixon was still around. No, she hadn't *touched* him since we'd been together. Yes, he called her at work sometimes. Yes, they'd gone out to lunch once or twice. *No,* nothing had happened. Didn't I believe her? How could I even think that?

I said I wanted very much to believe her, but why hadn't she told me about him before?

Because it only made things more confused . . .

Our voices got louder, and dinner, a nice dinner, got colder.

Friend stayed with us until about Round Three, then slunk out of the room, head and tail low. I felt like telling him to stay, hadn't he started this war in the first place?

"So what is *your* definition of trust, Egan? As far as you can throw me?"

"Oh, come on, Kathleen. How would you feel if you were in my place? Turn the situation around."

"I'd feel fine, thank you. Because I'd *believe* what you told me."

"Gee, you're quite a girl."

That did it. She got up and left, mad as hell.

While I waited and worried, Jasenka called twice within an hour.

The first time she said only that Kathleen was at Vitamin D's house, and gave me his telephone number.

I called. A very sleepy man with a Southern accent answered. I asked for her.

"Hey, bud, do you know what *time* it is? Kat isn't here. I haven't seen her in days. Jesus, do you know what time it is? Hey, how'd you get this number in the first place? It's unlisted! Did Kat give it to you? Man, *she's* going to get it when I see her. She promised she wouldn't give it out to anyone."

"Look, this is really important. I'd really appreciate it if you'd let me talk to her. I'm her brother, and we've got some very serious family problems."

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"Oh no, I'm really sorry. But she isn't here, honest to God. Hold it a sec —I do have this other number where you might be able to reach her."

He gave me my number.

The second call from Jasenka lasted longer. Her voice was a child's whisper in a parent's ear. The words slowed and died at the end of every sentence.

"Egan? It's me again. Listen, you have to listen to me. The animals are rising. It's happening much sooner than I thought. They're going to kill everyone. They've had enough. Only their friends will be saved. Every animal in the world will do it. They'll kill everyone.

"Get a map as soon as you hang up. There's an island in Greece called Formori. F-O-R-M-O-R-I. You must go there immediately tomorrow. Everything will be starting in three days."

"Jazz —"

"No, be quiet! Formori is the place where they'll let some people live. People who are the animals' friends. Friend says you can go there and live, they'll let you. But not Kathleen. She wouldn't let him have his bone. Please, please go, Egan. Good-bye. I love you!"

It was the last time I ever talked to her. By the time I reached the hospital twenty minutes later, a sad-faced nurse told me she had just died.

Now it's almost three-thirty in the morning. I've looked at my world almanac and there it was: F-O-R-M-O-R-I.

I let Friend out three hours ago, and he hasn't returned. Neither has Kathleen.

The moon is still extraordinarily bright. While standing in the open doorway a few minutes ago, I saw what must have been thousands and thousands and thousands of birds flying in strict, unchanging patterns over its calm, lit face.

I must decide soon.

Coming soon

Next month: Russell Griffin, probably the freshest and most inventive of the new voices F&SF has published in the last few years, died suddenly in August 1986. He was only 43. One of his last stories was SAVING TIME, a fine adventure/comedy about a time-traveling professor. It will be our February feature story.

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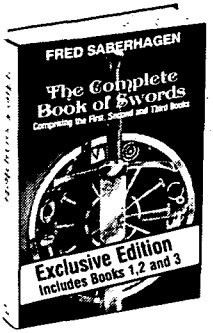

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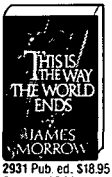

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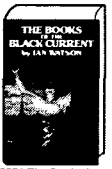

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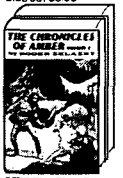

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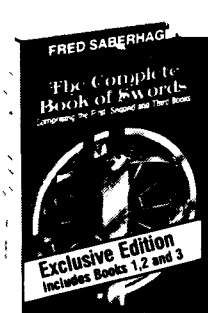

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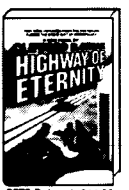

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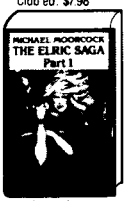

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